CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
STORY BY
SYOUGO KINUGASA
ART BY
TOMOSESHUNSAKU
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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
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"...Do you still need anything from me?"
"Is it weird if I talk to you with no particular reason?"
"Yes. Normally, you talk to someone because you have something to say."
"You're the same as always"

"At the end of the day, even if there are children who survive the curriculum, they are simply blessed with the talent of their parents."
"What do you plan to do when you go out into the outside world? Is there any meaning in that?"

SAKAYANAGI ARISU

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

NOVEL 0

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku

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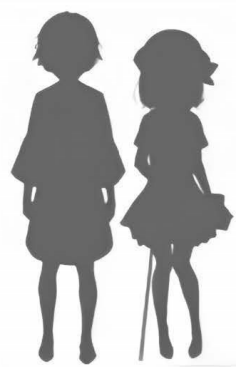

Ayanokōji Atsuomi's Monologue

WEALTH, POVERTY. FINANCIAL disparity.

Highly educated, poorly educated. Educational disparity.

Urban and rural areas. Regional disparity.

Disadvantaged young people, privileged old people. Generational disparity.

Japan is a disparate society. These are just a few instances I mentioned, but they truly represent the difference between heaven and hell. The important thing to remember is that not all realities are not stagnant. The poor can rise to become wealthy, and the wealthy can fall to become poor. For example, if you don't like regional disparities, you can move to the city.

Although I understood the logic, I had nothing. I was born in the countryside, extremely poor, and pitifully uneducated. I was not blessed with endurance, nor was I a hard worker.

If I had to name one aspect that would've made me a strong fighter, it'd be my youth. However, I didn't make the most of it and spent much of my time in idleness. You could say I had a slow paced life.

There was no bright future awaiting me, and there was a possibility that I would simply lead a miserable life. But I opened up the future with my own hands.

It was because I had something grander than others, That is — unbridled and ever-expanding "ambition."

I will rise to the top and stand at the top of this country.

With that in mind, I continued living my life until today. That ambition was the only thing that sustained me throughout my life.

When I turned twenty-five, I faced my first tribulation.

I had saved up three million yen by working part-time jobs. With this, I would become a politician and a member of the Japanese parliament, and build up huge wealth and prestige.

A fleeting and poor dream. I underestimated the election and lost miserably. It'd be lucky if that was all, but since I didn't even reach the required number of votes, they confiscated all of the three million I slaved myself to collect.

The government was not only trying to solve poverty, it was also

trying to create a clean political environment, combat the declining birthrate, raise wages, and fight for the “NO WAR” movement.

I assumed it wouldn’t be difficult to get elected if I just went around carelessly spouting all the beautiful things I could come up with without giving them too much thought. However, that would be a shallow and stupid idea.

Everyone comes up with such shallow thoughts.

What's important to win elections is which organization you belong to and who you work under, and whether you can discern enemies and allies while being wrapped up in a long game.

What happened afterward? You thought I had fallen?

I joined the ruling party, the Citizens' Party, and began taking my first steps as a politician.

Yes, two years later, I once again put my name forward in an election and won. In two years' time, I had succeeded in getting into a position where it was possible to pour my whole life, heart, and soul into politics.

This may have made me a winner, but for me, getting elected wasn't the goal.

Above all, the world of politics isn't that easy.

No, in some ways it was the deepest and blackest world out there. No matter how ambitious I am, I'm just another young member of the parliament with no backing or power.

Most of the people who're able to rise to power are second and third-generation people who were given the right to do so at birth. The sons of big politicians who are ignorant, dumb, and unaware of the danger they are in, who keep repeating their insipid empty remarks on TV, day and night.

Sometimes, they've even made the transition from show business to politics, using only their face and name recognition. Most of them are nothing more than mascots, but they still have more potential than a "have-not" like me. It's ironic. How do I make a name for myself as a politician? My options were limited from the start.

I had to take on the dirty jobs that no one else wanted to do. If I failed, my political career would be cut short immediately, and in some cases, criminal charges would be filed against me.

By taking the initiative in undertaking these tasks, I gradually strengthened my presence within the party. Eventually, I was known as the hidden sword of "Naoe-sensei," who united many factions in the Citizen's Party. I didn't hesitate to commit any kind of evil deed—pandering to underage girls, bribery, and espionage activities for hostile organizations.

Once I was entrusted with this project, the boundaries between right and wrong were removed for the sake of success. There were times when I connected with the yakuza or lesser gangs and resorted to violent means.

I had no time to rest, and I continued challenging myself. Before long, I was gaining influence within the party, and at the age of 36, I had one foot in power. But… from here on out, to jump into the very center of the political world, I would need further achievements and transgressions.

A newborn baby, one-month-old.

The first time I saw my child through the glass, he was staring blankly at the ceiling. No special feelings came to mind.

If I had to say, the only feeling I felt was relief that the key to move the higher-ups had arrived.

I'd been waiting impatiently for this moment for almost a year.

"Health check complete."

"Any problems?"

"There are no problems at present. The results of the DNA analysis were a match."

Tabuchi, who had completed all the tests, gave his report while looking at the results of the detailed examination.

I see. We can't get caught in the preliminary phase. Because that had been cleared up, we can say that the first stage has been accomplished.

"We could have you come in direct contact with them now."

"No need. Start the experiment immediately, just as you've done with the previous children."

The White Room project is already in its fourth phase. There's no need to waste time. I stopped to look at my child, who was about to be carried out of the room as instructed. If I put him in the White Room, I won't see him for a while, right?

"Wait a minute."

I headed down to my son, who was behind the glass that separated

us. Being directly in front of him, I could once again feel the little life close to me.

His head was not set, so I slipped my palm behind his neck and gently picked him up.

“You really are Sensei’s son. You’re about to undergo a rigorous education, but I’m sure you’ll achieve great resul-”

“What are you talking about? Get ready to start shooting.”

“What…?”

Tabuchi was stunned as if he didn’t understand what I was trying to say.

“I’m sending my child, who is more important to me than my own life, into the White Room. Capture that determination and tension on camera. It will be an important piece of propaganda to use at the next collection party.”

Parents who are not interested in their children or parents who don’t want to give up their children but are willing to give them up for the future.

One doesn’t have to wonder which will catch the gallery’s eye more.

“What…? Ah, yes.” Tabuchi hurriedly took out his cell phone and took pictures and videos of me holding the child.

After a minute or so of this, I put the baby down.

“Take him with you.”

“Okay.”

I cut my gaze from my child as he was being moved and began to prepare for the coming event.

“Anyway, all the necessary preparations are now in place. Put me through to Sakayanagi.”

It’s been almost a decade since I stepped into politics. Ostensibly, I’ve been laughing and slurping muddy water, but that ends today.

I’m starting a life for myself here. I will use and cut down anything I can, even my own children, and reach the top. Naoe-sensei, who

reigns as the absolute power, is no more than a stepping stone. He is an enemy that must eventually be overcome and crushed.

“If you don’t want to die, you’re on your own Kiyotaka.”

Whether you are a baby or an adult, in the end, you are on your own. Your situation may be the worst, but unfortunately, ours is similar. If you'd been raised as my family, it would've been more like neglect. In that sense, I guess you could say I'm still blessed to have had a good start.

I closed my eyes in silence, alone in the room where the child had disappeared. But you never know what life will bring.

I never thought that I would have a child of my own blood in any way.

The turning point came about four years after I started working for Naoe-sensei.

That's right.

That was when I learned about the existence of the White Room Project.

Chapter 1:

Project Inauguration

RYOTEI[1] SASAGAWA. It was late January, and although it wasn't snowing, the temperature was below freezing.

Under the cold weather, I had already been waiting for an hour for the master's arrival.

"It's cold, Ayanokōji-san… When is Naoe-sensei coming…?"

Kamogawa, complaining for the third time, exhaled into his hands to warm himself.

"It's always the same. For Naoe-sensei, the appointed time is just a formality."

"Does that mean he'll be an hour or two late at worst, by any chance?"

Apparently, that was the worst this man could imagine.

"How sweet. You're lucky if he shows up here today. Many times he doesn't show up at all."

"Oh, no… How long are you going to wait for someone who might not show up?"

"Forever. Unless I hear from him, I'll wait even if the store is closed."

"You'll die, you know…"

If you call yourself a Naoe faction member, you should be willing to die, but I'm sure Naoe-sensei won't care about the deceased.

We're merely the intermediaries.

Rather, it's those who are already waiting for Naoe-sensei in the ryotei who are not so keen on the idea.

"But… It's amazing that someone is allowed to be loose with time.

I'd normally be pissed off."

"Loose with time? Do you really think so?"

"Yes, I do."

"Even being late is a weapon for Naoe-sensei. As in the story of Ganryujima Island and Musashi Miyamoto."[2]

Of course, he wouldn't normally use such an old tale as a strategy. It's precisely because he's Naoe-sensei that he's allowed to do such unrefined measures.

“The basic premise is that 80% of those who are turned away from a meeting have no choice but to cry themselves to sleep.”

These numbers are proof that not many people can stand up to Naoe-sensei. Even the current Prime Minister has no choice but to constantly ask Naoe-sensei for help. No matter how long they have to wait, they greet Naoe-sensei with a smile.

“The other 20%… What about them?”

“What’s the use of listening to the remaining 20% of idiots?”

“Well, just for the sake of knowing…”

“They were so irritated at being stood up that they shouted at me and demanded that I call Naoe-sensei and make him tell them how long he’ll keep them waiting.”

Kamogawa, next to me, swallowed his spit as he cleared his throat.

Even though he’d only been in politics for a short time, he knows the horror of giving orders to Naoe-sensei. But each time I was faced with such circumstances, I took a firm stand and gave them all the same response.

“’I can’t have Naoe-sensei taken cheaply.’ I’ll just kick them out like that.”

I force them to bow their heads and either request another appointment or never show their faces again.

Now, another 80% of the people will bow down again.

While they have venom in their heart, they still make it a priority to see Naoe-sensei. Well, it’s almost impossible to have a smooth relationship with him when they choose to do so.

“It seems that Ayanokōji-san is having a hard time.”

“They say hard work pays off, but I’ve actually been hit more than once or twice—with an ashtray and a golf club.”

Since they can’t get their hands on Naoe-sensei, they have no choice but to take their frustration out on me. But getting punched doesn’t mean that Naoe-sensei will give me any gratitude.

“I can’t wrap my head around it. Ayanokōji-san, have you been repeating this kind of thing for nearly four years?”

“It’s simple, but not for everyone. But anyone can do it if they are willing to die for it.”

That’s why I, who have no backing, no education, no intelligence, and no family background, get a chance.

But this guy doesn’t know anything.

He’s two years older than me and a first-year councilor.

“Didn’t Senator Kamogawa teach you the ironclad rule?”

The man standing next to me is the kind of politician I despise the most.

“My father didn’t tell me anything like that…”

Typical second generation politician. Grew up spoiled and continues to survive in politics.

An abhorrent leech, but only a chosen one born into a privileged class can become one.

Kamogawa's father, Senator Kamogawa Toshizou, a long-time supporter of Naoe-sensei, is a veteran of over 30 years in politics.

Naturally, he would never allow his son to experience the harsh underclass. He's unlike me, a discarded piece that can be broken but continues to be valued as one of the parts that support the backbone of the Naoe faction.

"The only thing I was taught is that if I just shut up and follow Naoe-sensei, I would be safe as a politician. He said I could be a senator forever, the salary would be stable, and eventually I would be able to get a post there."

He doesn't have anything he wants to accomplish as a politician but becomes one just to survive.

There are a certain number of such people, second generation or otherwise.

It's a foolish and corrupt mindset, but these types live uselessly long lives.

They're a blessing to those at the top because they can be tamed and get a vote among their peers without complaint.

"I can't wait to get out of the lower ranks and receive a cushy job."

Kamogawa looked up at the night sky as he grumbled and complained.

"I'm hungry too… On a cold day like this, hot sake[3] is the only way to go."

Can't this guy even wait in silence?

"Enough, shut up for a minute, Kamogawa."

"It's okay to chat. It's not like sensei is here. Tell me more about Naoe-sensei and Ayanokōji-san."

I didn't care about the Naoe-sensei part, but what he said after that caught my attention.

"You mean about me?"

"I've heard rumors that most of the people who work under Naoe-sensei become useless soon, but Ayanokōji-san is a promising newcomer who's highly valued. I'd like to know the trick to success for working under Naoe-sensei."

Kamogawa spoke as if it was someone else's problem, believing the rumors. I felt the urge to punch him just then, but that would only give me a temporary sense of exhilaration.

Four years later, and I'm still a rookie. I should be more concerned about the fact that I'm being treated like this.

"Time for chit-chat is over. Turn your head."

"What?"

I immediately adjusted my posture at the faint sound of a cab in the distance.

Kamogawa understood what it meant, and after clearing his throat, he straightened his back.

The cab slowly arrived in front of the ryotei.

Shortly thereafter, another black sedan pulled up slightly behind the cab. Without even a glance, it was obvious that these were Naoe-sensei's bodyguards.

I quickly returned my gaze to the cab, but the door didn't open, and Kamogawa tilted his head curiously.

I could see Naoe-sensei through the window, so I restrained Kamogawa as he was about to run over.

"Don't do anything I don't want you to do."

"Yeah, but…"

In the backseat of the cab, as far as I could see through the window, I discerned that a man and a woman were in intimate contact with each other.

If I interfered, I might incur unnecessary reprimand.

However, it was unusual for Naoe-sensei to be accompanied by a woman.

And even though it was in a cab in the middle of the night, it seemed an unwise move for a politician. After a minute of silence in the back seat of the cab, the door finally opened.

"See you later, sensei~."

Kamogawa finally understood when he heard the young woman's catcall from the back seat.

Naoe-sensei, who then chatted with the woman for a few more moments, slowly exited the cab.

One slender man got out instantly from the sedan's passenger seat behind him as well.

Without saying a word, he stood silently next to Naoe-sensei.

It's a bodyguard with a new face I've never seen before. But there's

no time to care.

“Thank you, Naoe-sensei.”

“Oh, thank you!”

Was Kamogawa flustered because he saw the scene with the woman, or because he’s simply up in front of Naoe-sensei?

Even if it was the latter, he was a fool when he acted in a way that could be taken as the former.

I took a half step in front of the eyesore that was Kamogawa and blocked his face with my shoulder.

But that may have been a needless worry.

Naoe-sensei, who had no regard for Kamogawa, was directing his sharp gaze only at the ryotei.

“Where’s Asama?”

His suit and posture, which reminded me of his old age, made him look young at the same time.

“He is waiting for you. Let me show you around.”

I gave a glance to the nervous Kamogawa in the back, instructing him to pay the cab fare, and I led Naoe-sensei inside the ryotei.

As soon as we passed through the curtain, everyone from the proprietress to the head chef appeared in a hurry and bowed their heads.

Naoe-sensei took off his shoes without a change in his expression while he permeated the area with his aura.

Stepping on the wooden floor, he made his way to a private room at the far end of the restaurant.

Naoe Jinnosuke. A member of the ruling Citizens’ Party, he has served in a number of positions, including Minister of Transportation and Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry, and is currently serving as secretary-general of the party.

Although the secretary-general post is half a step behind that of the vice president, not to mention the prime minister, in terms of importance, the secretary-general is by far the most important post.

He’s the party’s general manager, who holds the real power of the party.

Although he’ll turn sixty-eight this year, he hasn’t shown the slightest sign of retiring from active service.

In the world of politics, where there’s no retirement age, he’ll remain in his current position for another 10 or 20 years, unless his physical condition becomes a problem.

“Asama-sensei, I’ve brought Naoe-sensei with me.”

Beyond the shoji[4], Asama-sensei was waiting in seiza[5] to welcome Naoe-sensei. Upon seeing Naoe-sensei, he stood up and bowed deeply.

Asama Hisashi. He is 71 years old—three years older than Naoe-sensei.

He is currently serving as a vice minister of the Ministry of Land,

Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism, and is a leading figure in the Naoe faction.

For me, even Asama-sensei is a resident of the clouds.

But if Naoe-sensei appears here, he instantly switches from master to slave.

It's a regular scene that shows at a glance that there's such a gap in power.

"We have been expecting you, Naoe-sensei."

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Asama. I've been busy with work."

"I know how busy you are."

I bowed my head, rubbed my forehead against the tatami, and quietly closed the shoji so as not to disturb the dialogue.

From this point on, it wasn't acceptable to listen to the conversation between two big-name politicians.

“Quickly, Naoe-sensei. I’d like to ask you about that matter.”

I only had a sheet of shoji separating us.

The devil once whispered to me to continue eavesdropping and pick up useful information.

Or I could even bug the place.

But the world is not a sweet place.

Any deviousness would soon be exposed, and my political life would be cut short.

I got up, left the place, and moved to another room far away.

In the private room that had been prepared for him, Kamogawa was situated on the lower seat, his gaze fixed on the sake in front of him.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No problem. Let’s get started right away.

“Don’t drink.”

“I’ve never seen this in an izakaya[6]. What’s this brand of sake?”

“Are you going to make me smell the sake as I see Naoe-sensei and the others off?”

“There’s nothing to be gained by carelessly messing around with alcohol.”

“Oh, no…”

A dazzling fine-dining restaurant. I don’t blame him for feeling upset when told not to drink alcohol before dinner. In fact, I almost gave in to temptation a few times in the past.

Fortunately, I was able to witness the moment when someone who was mentoring me at the time got into alcohol and was reprimanded and cut for it, which led to my current abstinence. I’ve come to believe that the “alcohol” for those in power is the suffering of those below them.

It’s not only the lower-ranking members of the parliament. They

look down on the people themselves.

They are always intoxicated by the fulfillment of their desire for conquest, ruling by rules of their own making.

“Ayanokōji-sensei, I have one thing on my mind…”

He’s a real chatterbox.

“Why do you always sit on your knees? Why don’t you just slouch at the table?”

“I’m used to it. I have to sit on my haunches for hours in front of Naoe-sensei and the others without a care in the world. If you don’t get used to it on a regular basis, you will be in trouble when the time comes.”

We’re not even allowed to make a statement such as, ‘May I relax my legs?’

There was no other option but to continue sitting on the floor until your legs became necrotic.

“Oh, my God…”

Kamogawa, who probably had no confidence in sitting on his haunches, hurriedly sat back down on his seat.

Even a small piece of egg tofu served on a small plate would’ve cost a great amount if ordered by itself.

However, there was no need to be grateful. I grabbed the small plate in a messy manner and poured it into my stomach without chewing it.

“What a waste…!”

I continue to eat, ignoring most of Kamogawa’s incessant chatter.

I’m not interested in how expensive it was, how fresh it looked, or where the plate came from.

As long as I have enough energy to keep moving afterwards, that’s all that matters.

“I’m going to the bathroom.”

I turned away from Kamogawa, stood up on my slightly numb legs, and left the room.

After using the restroom, I was about to return to the private room where Kamogawa was waiting for me when I spotted the backs of men in suits. Among them, there was a man who stood out from the crowd.

It was only for a moment, however, as he then turned a corner at the end of the hallway and disappeared from sight.

“What was that?”

I was tempted to follow him and see if he was who I thought he was, but I held back.

Though, I was sure that the figure was Senator Kijima. He was not a member of any of the three major factions: Naoe-sensei, Isomaru-sensei, and Prime Minister Miyako. Although small in number, he was in the fourth faction in the Citizen’s Party, not belonging to any of the

three major factions.

He's so promising that he's even touted as the man closest to the prime minister among the younger generation.

It's not usual that they happen to be at this same ryotei restaurant.

It's customary for the ryotei to make arrangements in secret so as not to allow an unfortunate encounter.

Is it possible that Naoe-sensei has already begun making moves toward the next election?

1

The meeting ended about an hour after Naoe-sensei entered the private room.

After seeing Senator Asama off, Naoe-sensei called me and Kamogawa into a private room.

Based on the three boar cups as well as the number of small bowls of food on the table, I could assume that Senator Kijima was in this room.

The food was delicious, however, there's no sign that they touched their chopsticks, so it seems that they finished their meal mostly by discussing. It seems clear that they had a few drinks and then called it a night.

"Is there something on your mind?"

I feel a tension in my heart—as if he read the slightest glance I gave him.

"No, it's nothing."

'Someone was here, wasn't there?' There was no way I could say such a thing.

I guess it was only natural for him to know what was on my mind, but he didn't pursue the matter.

"Ayanokōji, how long have you been working for me?"

"This is my fourth year under sensei."

"That's right. First of all, only a handful of people can become politicians in their 20s. I can say without a doubt that you are the first among the "have-nots" to climb the ladder of success."

The have-nots. It's one of the terms coined by Naoe-sensei that refers to those who aren't blessed with a good environment. Such as second or third generation people, excluding those whose parents are from the business world and have strong backup, who I dislike.

It's not an exaggeration to say that whether or not one actually makes it big as a politician is determined by these two categories: the

“haves” or the “have-nots.”

To put it simply, it’s similar to an owner-operated company that’s run by family members.

Outsiders are outsiders, no matter how talented they are. Unless you’re extremely talented and lucky, there’s a limit to the summit you can aim for.

There’s no bright future awaiting the have-nots.

In other words, the reach of a person like me usually stops there in the world of politics. The only way to go further than that is to entrust my children to pass it on to the second generation. Then, as a result of further selection, I will be allowed to reach the upper echelons somewhere in my generation.

However, since there are already many second and third generations vying for the few available seats, it won't be easy for them to rise in the political world even if they send their descendants into politics in the same way. Those who sit in the chairs first will be connected to the fourth and fifth generations as stronger holders.

"I am truly grateful to you, Naoe-sensei. You picked up someone like me."

"It's because of your ability. In fact, I've been helped in many ways."

There was no point in exchanging pleasantries. But it was an unavoidable path for a politician.

Whenever Naoe-sensei praises someone, something unwelcome awaits him.

"But your ability is not yet recognized within the party."

"Of course. I am very much aware of that."

All the credit, big or small, will be siphoned off by Naoe-sensei.

The only one who understands that those feats originally belonged to me is Naoe-sensei, who's right in front of me.

Especially when it comes to the opposition, I'm sure the same goes for the unknown.

"Today's discussion, as you may have guessed, was about Isomaru."

Isomaru Youkou has reigned in politics for many years as the number three of the Civic Party.

"He's getting old, just like me. There aren't many chances to get the prime minister's seat, you know."

Was this a discussion to counter Isomaru-sensei's rival presence?

"The faction members are very wary of Isomaru anyway. He's certainly an opponent not to be underestimated, but if you ask me, he's an easy guy to understand. For better or worse, he's a man who only uses old-fashioned methods."

After decades of friendly competition in the political world, they

probably know each other's tricks.

"I don't think Isomaru is the one we really need to watch out for."

"You mean…"

"Are you acquainted with Kijima?"

Perhaps because I saw the back of what appeared to be Senator Kijima, my body reacted involuntarily.

Today, I heard only of important figures, including Asama-sensei.

Naoe-sensei's sharp eyes, unchanged from usual, laid upon me.

"I've seen him several times, but I've never had the chance to talk to him directly."

"I think he's the biggest enemy we should be wary of."

Although they are members of the same political party, he doesn't hesitate to call them enemies.

This is evidence that Naoe-sensei, who's been enjoying his own power, is very wary of Kijima-san.

If Naoe-sensei and Isomaru-sensei are the shadows of the Citizens' Party, the exact opposite is true for Kijima-san. Kijima-sensei is a young and powerful man who, under the light, is being promoted as the signboard of the Citizen's Party, pushing clean policies to the forefront.

Although the number of party members who naturally support him continues to increase, it'll be a while before he threatens Naoe-sensei and his colleagues.

I had thought so. But it seems that he acknowledges Kijima more than I assumed. I wondered if he had grown to the point where he was a threat to Naoe-sensei.

The three young men gathered under the leadership of Prime Minister Miyako are Naoe-sensei, number two, Isomaru-sensei, number three, and the young Kijima-sensei, number four. They are earnestly vying for the next prime minister's seat.

"Do you know what is the biggest factor in Kijima's rise to his current post?"

"I'm sure he has many accomplishments, but I would say the highlight is the existence of the 'ANHS.'"

Advanced Nurturing High School. An institution established to nurture young people with a future directly under the government.

It has not yet achieved much, but great expectations are being placed on it.

It is more correct to say that the government has high expectations for it.

"The education of children is inseparable from the development of a country. ANHS is well received by the supporters. I'm impressed that they have come up with an interesting idea, even for an enemy."

Kamogawa listens with sweat on his forehead, unable to interrupt the conversation.

The air conditioner in the room is quite hot but it's not

unreasonable, given the content of the conversation.

“Young party members are blindly putting faith in him.”

With his extensive media exposure, many of them view the Civic Party through Kijima. “I just wanted to make sure you weren’t on Kijima’s side too..”

“You must be joking. I will only be under your care.”

This is at least not a lie.

Even if Isomaru-sensei or Kijima-sensei’s faction makes a great leap forward in the next election and Naoe-sensei is deprived of his position, they’ll have to share the fate of the sinking ship.

But what was the purpose of having dinner with Kijima-sensei, such an alarming opponent? I’m curious, but I don’t have time to focus on that right now.

“Actually, today we decided to officially start the project we’ve been discussing behind the scenes.” Saying this, Naoe-sensei releases a brown A4-sized envelope onto the table.

“This project is a serious one that could affect my political life. Now that not only Isomaru, but also Kijima, and the opposition parties are slowly rising to the top, it’s finally time to move it.”

> Naoe, who lives so that someone else will refill his cup when it’s empty,

drank it all in one gulp.

“The project’s existence will definitely have a big impact on the election.”

That’s how important the contents of the envelope in front of him are.

“Most of my aides don’t even last six months before they leave. Either pure incompetence or they can’t keep up with the unimaginably hard work. But you’ve been with me for four years now, and you’re not just getting weaker, you’re getting stronger by the day. You remind me of my old self.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Let me ask you guys. What kind of politician is superior? Kamogawa, answer me.” He asked him such a question.

“What?”

He could neither keep his silence nor give a proper answer.

A very good politician. That would be very different based on the viewpoint of those who were watching him.

“He who can answer the wishes of the people…?”

An answer, but a simple one. From the people’s point of view, that is. Even a child could have come up with that answer, but Naoe-sensei nodded once and looked at me this time.

“How about you, Ayanokōji?”

Excellent or not, that’s the answer.

“If I may say so, I believe it would be someone like Naoe-sensei.”

Receiving praise, Naoe began to curl his lips but I quickly resumed speaking.

“Bad politicians serve tempura to customers who want sushi.”

“Customers? What do you mean?”

“A customer is a customer. Sometimes they are the people, sometimes they are politicians, sometimes they are something else.”

Politicians aren’t dealing with any one group in particular.

A politician who can’t answer the needs of an unspecified number of customers is not needed.

“Don’t you have your way with words? So, what’s your point?”

“A good politician will serve good sushi to customers who ask for it. Probably only 30%… no, 20% of politicians can do this… Politicians who have the support of many people naturally fall into this category.”

“Wouldn’t you say that’s a very good politician already? Because he serves the customers the sushi they want, and he serves it well, right?”

Certainly, this is the limit of what a good politician can achieve for an ordinary person. But I don’t think that’s what it means to be one that’s excellent.

“If you claim to be a superior politician, you need to be more than that. I consider him to be someone who can induce customers who want sushi to be maximally satisfied by offering them curry and beef bowls.”

It’s not enough for a politician to answer requests obediently. There are many situations in which it’s necessary to avoid causing dissatisfaction, even if the requests cannot be answered at times. Even when it comes to a single bill, there are only two choices: to pass it or not to pass it.

Those who don’t pass the bill will be dissatisfied. That is why we have to prepare a third option that is neither of the two and suppress both support and opposition.

The Naoe-sensei in front of me has shown such skill many times.

“I see. Quite a nice way to put it.”

“Thank you.”

Here, Naoe-sensei’s eyes turned even more intense and sharp.

“I hope someday you can put that idea into practice with your own hands.”

Someday. Someday, huh? It’s already been four years, but in the political world that is nothing at all.

I wonder how many more years I have to continue working in the bottom before that someday arrives.

“Don’t look so down. You’re capable. I can see that after watching you for four years. That’s why what’s required of youngsters like you

is tangible results.”

He took a bite of his snack with his chopsticks, then turned the tip of the chopsticks toward the envelope.

“I don’t think it’s ‘only been four years’. It’s already been four years. It’s about time you got some credit for making it on your own.”

“You mean you’ll give me that opportunity?”

Time and time again, I have repeatedly set the stage for Naoe-sensei.

The credit goes to Naoe-sensei alone, and the mismanagement goes to me alone. It is not mere charity that I have repeated such irrationality and absurdity. The fist on my lap naturally clenched tighter.

“Y ou can take it that way. But I’m going to make sure it succeeds. Are you ready for that?”

‘Do you mind if I look inside the envelope?’ There was no way I could say such a thing.

“Shortly after I received my position under you, you once said to me, ‘Everything one does is determined by one’s goals.’”

I had no way of knowing it at the time, but it was a quote from a great man.

If I fail, my past four years will probably be erased in an instant.

“I will put my whole heart and soul into this.”

I bowed deeply and readily agreed to take on the project.

“If you succeed in this project, fame will naturally follow, you know.”

I don’t trust him at all, but I’ve never even heard him say such a suggestive thing before.

At least it’s true that this is a different and more important project. It’s a chance I received because I’ve earned his trust. I’m not going to miss it.

“Look it over.”

“Excuse me.”

I picked up the brown envelope on the table and pulled out a stack of papers about 5mm thick.

The first sheet is titled “Human Resource Development Plan (tentative).”

“The level of education in Japan is going down. Japan now needs to provide education not for the next five or ten years, but for the next 20 or 30 years.”

“I’ve never heard that you’re enthusiastic about education.”

“Politicians are supposed to focus on education. Even if they’re not the slightest bit interested in it, it will lead to votes inside and outside.”

This man doesn’t really want to change education in Japan. He’s

just formulating a strategy to increase his power and gain more support.

The idiot next to him is fidgeting and wondering about the details of the project.

“You can join in too, Kamogawa. Try it with Ayanokōji.”

“Oh, thank you!”

Kamogawa peeked in somewhat forcefully, smiling happily.

There was no need to have this guy help me, but if Naoe-sensei decided so, I had no choice. The human resource development plan, to put it simply, was to provide education for gifted children as soon as they were born.

After I finished reading through everything, I had Kamogawa read it again.

“What do you think? Do you understand it, Kamogawa?”

“An educational institution under the direct control of the government, starting from infancy? I’ve never heard of it.”

The questions that sprang from Kamogawa’s head were meaningless.

“If you’ve heard of it, you can’t say it’s a major attraction, can you?”

Without any need for me to correct him, he was kicked to the curb by Naoe-sensei.

There is not a problem with this project

“You’ve got to learn to be a little more flexible, Kamogawa.”

“I’m sorry…”

“But since you’re such a newcomer, I’d like to ask you something. How does this project look in your eyes?”

“Well… I don’t know what to say.”

The snake stared at me, or rather, it didn’t even look at me, but it stiffened. Then, with a tearful expression on his face, he turned to me for help.

“Naoe wants to know what you think of this project. He doesn’t want your superficial approval, you can answer as you like.”

If I made any comments that would make Naoe-sensei look bad, I would only spoil his good mood.

“Well, then… um, I was wondering.. would there be parents who would send their children to an institution to be educated from infancy? It just doesn’t seem feasible to me… It would have to be kidnapping, wouldn’t it?”

Hearing this, Naoe-sensei looked my way as if testing me.

“That’s a fair question. Can you answer that, Ayanokōji?”

An uneducated answer that might be acceptable for a rookie, but not for me. I took a breath and turned to Kamogawa.

“It doesn’t matter. There are hundreds of children abandoned by their parents immediately after birth every year, at least that we know of.”

Procuring babies is no small feat.

“Abandoned children can receive generous government support and proper teaching without putting their lives in danger. Education without risking their lives. The project also makes it easier for them to enter high school and college.”

“Exactly. Yes, the answer is the same, but if the process that leads to procuring children are unconventional, you will see the project in a very different light. You’ll have to study hard under the road.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Depending on how it unfolds, it could lead to an approach to mothers. There are easily over a hundred thousand abortion procedures a year in this country with its declining birthrate. It could be a satire on a society that does not easily allow childbearing, and it could also serve as a receptacle.”

Grinning, Naoe-sensei nodded and took another sip of sake.

“And if this plan works, of course the political and business worlds will be very interested.”

“What?”

“Apart from the lives that’ll be discarded, there are also many lives that won’t be treated fairly, especially for wealthy people. Illegitimate children and unacknowledged children…? Is that right?”

“Yes, there are many famous people who have children in secret. However, they’re unable to provide a proper education due to lack of outward support. And if the government supports them behind the scenes, I’m sure they’ll change their attitude and hope for the best.”

Little by little, the full picture of this project began to emerge.

“And eventually, some of them will want their beloved children to have the best education possible.”

That is Naoe-sensei’s idea of a human resource development planning project.

He receives funds from wealthy families and takes the children they want kept hidden to educate them. He then trains them thoroughly so that when they eventually come of age, they will become Naoe Faction members, and sends them off to political office. And they will be obedient servants who’ve been educated for gifted children. They’d also be children who share the blood of businessmen.

Is this the beginning of a forward-looking plan? It may seem risky, but if it succeeds, the rewards will be immeasurable. If we refuse to back down at this point, we will be immediately removed from the ladder by Naoe-sensei.

“The people on this list…”

“The people on this list are geniuses who’ve been banished from the field. They are difficult to deal with.”

There were about ten documents, each one with a biography like a resume.

“These are people who left the stage due to problems in economics, psychology, and other fields, despite their ability to represent Japan, or even the world.”

I see. This human resource development project entails various risks. If the children are to be educated in a semi-mandatory manner, there will naturally be opposition to the project. In that sense, it’s not likely that a prominent figure with authority would willingly

cooperate.

On the other hand, if they are well-known for their abilities despite their problems, it would be easier to get them to agree to the project by offering them money.

They may have many issues with their personality, but they certainly seem to be competent. Without knowledge and experience, education can only be done in a vague way. That said, it wouldn't be realistic to pull in people like those tutors and develop them into leading figures in Japan. It's not an easy job, I'm flattered to say.

“Remember? Right after you came under my employment, we talked about education.”

“Of course I do. My philosophy of education is to get children interested in politics from an early age, to have them learn about it, and to develop them into politically-minded individuals. This will lead to the future of Japan, and that is why I asked to be allowed to be taken under Naoe-sensei.”

“I thought it was just some clever nonsense from a rookie congressman right after he told me, but in the end, I got the idea from that statement myself. In other words, you are qualified to participate. Will you do it? Ayanokōji.”

These are not words asking for confirmation. It was no different from a coercion or order. The minimum requirement, then, is that I accept the offer with a resounding “yes” from a moral standpoint, and this time is no different.

It’s the best project that sublimates and embodies my educational philosophy.

“Of course, I will accept the project.”

“This is a top-secret project, and not only in the opposition party, but also in the ruling party, it’s not at a stage where we should inform them. Besides, there are ethical issues involved. If it’s exposed at the halfway stage and you come under criticism, your political life will be over.”

My political life will just end, not Naoe-sensei’s, who drafted this project. No, to be precise, it will result in several people hanging themselves, including Kamogawa beside me.

“I will do my best. However, I have a favor to ask of Naoe-sensei.”

“What?”

I know it may seem presumptuous, but I would like to speak up now.

“This project will be difficult for me and Kamogawa to proceed alone. Could you please introduce me to someone you trust?”

“Of course I’m going to do that. There is a man named Sakayanagi

who's well known in the political and business world. He is a young man not much older than you, but he's well-spoken and trustworthy. You should give him a try."

I've heard of him before, I think he's the old man in charge of the ANHS… but in any case, he must be a man with the backing of Kijima-sensei.

"I didn't say it well enough," he said. The Sakayanagi you imagine has a son. That's the one you will meet with."

I see. He must not be directly related to Kijima-sensei.

"Understood, sir."

"And I have something important to tell you, don't expect any financial support from me."

"What? A project of this magnitude is going to cost a lot of money."

I grabbed Kamogawa by the shoulders and stopped him from saying anything else.

“It’s going to require a certain amount of recklessness, but… can we borrow Naoe-sensei’s name?”

“That’s not possible right now either. It’s not a good idea to let on that I’m involved.”

Kamogawa’s face, knowing that he couldn’t get any backup, grew pale at the sight of the situation.

“Well, I’ll be counting on you, Ayanokōji.”

He was being very unreasonable. But I had to swallow his recklessness in order to move forward.

“I will carry out this project with all my heart.”

Even if this was just an idea, a project that he would throw away tomorrow, if that’s what Naoe-sensei wants now, I will just respond to it. We were advised and dismissed. I took the initiative to open the sliding door of the room in order to see Naoe-sensei off.

At the end of the corridor, a newcomer, a bodyguard, was waiting for Naoe-sensei’s return. “Oh yes. Was this the first time Ayanokōji had met this man?”

“sensei’s bodyguards work very hard, so it’s not unusual for them to be replaced.”

The man in front of me looks at me with a smile on his face the whole time.

“May I introduce myself?”

The bodyguard responded showing no particular interest. Normally bodyguards aren’t allowed to make such comments, but Naoe-sensei didn’t seem to be offended. His voice sounded thin, but Naoe-sensei seemed to buy it. He must be more than just a guy.

“His name is Ayanokōji, and he’s a moderately promising legislator. It wouldn’t hurt to say hello.”

A man with a straight, beautiful posture stepped closer to me and held out his hand.

“My name is Tokinari Tsukishiro. I’m sorry to say that I’m not a bodyguard.”

“You say you are not a bodyguard… Who are you?”

“He’s well… he’s a jack-of-all-trades, to put it plainly. If you have any trouble, you can count on Tsukishiro. He may not be much older than you, but he’s a very useful man.

“A jack-of-all-trades?”

As if he had been waiting for me, the man who introduced himself as Tsukishiro offered me his business card.

“From personal protection to information gathering, I’ll do anything you need.”

So he's a 'whatever you need,' sort of person? What a shady guy. But the fact that Naoe-sensei is walking around with him like this means there's no doubt that he's capable in his own way.

"My name is Ayanokōji, and Naoe-sensei is taking good care of me. If there's any inconvenience, I would very much appreciate your assistance."

"I'm not only a member of the Citizens' Party, but I'm also a member of the Peace Party."

The Peace Party is the first opposition party. It's an organization that has always had an adversarial relationship with the Citizens Party. Just before I became a politician, the Peace Party almost won the election in an upset. If not for Naoe-sensei's orchestration of the Peace Party, the administration might have been overturned.

If you belong to one side, you are hostile to the other side. That's universal, regardless of if you're a politician or not. But being a friend to both sides?

Tsukishiro walked away with Naoe-sensei, keeping an eerie smile on his face the whole time. He put Naoe-sensei into the waiting cab and continued to bow his head until the car was out of sight.

"It's cold. I don't think anyone is watching anymore…?"

"Still, keep your head down for at least a minute after the car is out of sight. And don't let up or look tired after you're done lowering your head. You never know where the eyes are."

That's exactly what the people at the ryotei are doing, even stealing glances at us. If they hear that Naoe-sensei was using foul language as soon as he left, that would be the end of it.

"But why was Naoe-sensei in a cab today? And why was he being intimate with a young girl? Even if you ignore the age difference, that's cheating."

"That's why he's such a jack-of-all-trades, isn't it?"

"What?"

Of course, I don't know the specifics. But if I dare to think of a reason, it could be that Naoe-sensei himself was acting as a decoy to

lure someone out. That's a possibility.

"That's not what we should be concerned about. Focus on the human resource development project."

It's always the case that things are unfolding horribly behind the scenes that we know nothing about.

"It's a great project, but it's sort of outrageous."

It's true that it's a hell of a project. However, it seems like a blunder that Naoe-sensei let Kamogawa in on it as well.

This man is light-mouthed and has no convictions whatsoever. That's all well and good as long as the plan works, but when it doesn't…

No, Naoe-sensei is not blind to such things. Should I take it as a sign that he dared to have this man by his side in case I failed? I don't know the details, but it looks like I'll have to start off with a nasty shackle on me.

Chapter 2:

Effort

DESPITE WORD FROM a big-name politician, progress is still complicated.

The Human Resource Development Plan is still only in the conceptual stage, and everything, including fundraising, is just beginning, so to speak.

Except for the “training from infancy,” which is an indispensable framework, the plan isn’t set in stone.

We need to change and respond flexibly.

“…This is going to be a messy project.”

I set my feet up on the paper flooded desk and continued staring at the documents.

One wrong move and this project would be frowned upon instead of appreciated.

This is a facility to save children, not to take advantage of them.

That’s the impression that must be created in many’s minds.

But that’s only after the project has actually started.

The first step now is to gather the children to be experimented on and the huge budget for the project.

Additionally, we need a way to acquire the children.

I dialed in the 11-digit number I memorized.

“It’s me. Put me on the phone with Ohba, I need a new job.”

First, I have to figure out an approach, regardless of good or evil, using the pieces I have available.

Then, after Ohba answers on the other end of the phone, I’ll tell him

that I'm trying to find a way to get a newborn baby and ask him to tell me what to do.

But I know that contacting Ohba will inevitably lead me to having to rely on malicious methods.

In the middle of the conversation, a buzzing chime sounded.

"I'm sorry, but I'll call you back."

I ended my discussion with Ohba mid-sentence and decided to attend to my visitor.

"Good morning, this is Kamogawa. Is Ayanokōji-san there?"

"Enter, It's unlocked."

"Excuse… me".

In a corner of the shabby office, Kamogawa's face appeared gloomily.

"Wow."

As soon as I opened the door, I was presented with Kamogawa's blatantly rude attitude.

However, he didn't make any attempt to butt in, which is a common reaction among visitors.

"By any chance, does Ayanokōji-san live in this office? It smells a little occupied…"

With beer cans lying on the floor at my feet, unwashed sheets on the tired sofa, and messy clothes on the ground, even a child could easily come to that conclusion.

"So what?"

"No, not that there's anything wrong with it, but it's… It's just not like…"

"Not worth the legislator's annual salary?"

The Japanese Parliament member's monthly salary is well over a million yen. Their bonuses are similar to that and total more than 20 million. On various occasions, they also get paid hourly wages.

"Kisarazu-san, who is three years older than me, boasted that he had signed a contract for the top floor of a tower block in the city center the week after he became a member of the Japanese Parliament. He also stated that he was able to get a loan approval that he normally wouldn't have been able to get."

"He didn't get approved because he's a member of the Japanese Parliament."

"What?"

"It's true that the Japanese Parliament's annual income is high from the perspective of ordinary companies. However, whether they're members of the House of Representatives or the House of Councilors, they're subject to election every few years. There's no way that banks would unconditionally lend high amounts of money to such unstable positions just because of their titles."

"But Kisarazu-san said it went through…"

"The amount of the loan, which bank, and connections—I can provide any number of other conditions to get it approved."

"So that's what you're saying is… I won't be able to get my loan through…"

It's the other way around. It's true that the Kamogawa in front of me is valued lower than Kisarazu on his own, but the bank sees his father, Kamogawa Toshizou, through him.

When they hear that he's looking for a lender, workers from many banks will come to see Kamogawa. They would even bring a pastry or two.

"Nonsense."

"'Nonsense'? Who wouldn't want to live in a luxury condo?"

"I'm telling you, for your own good, don't do what Kisarazu did."

No wonder a money-grabbing counselor would use such a stupid tactic.

"I'm not saying don't buy property. I'm just saying don't misjudge the right time to do so. Money is finite, but there are infinite possibilities."

"I see…"

Kamogawa nodded his head as if he understood.

“Suppose a hundred million yen appeared in front of you right now and you could have it. What would you do?”

“I would save about 90 million and grandly spend 10 million. I’d go to cabarets and buy a car. I might put some of it in stocks. If I had 200 million, I would buy a condominium.”

In one sense, this is an exemplary answer, but like Kisarazu, it’s just a trivial use of money.

“You mean you wouldn’t use the money in that way, Ayanokōji-san, right? What would you do with it?”

“Think for yourself.”

“What? Please tell me.”

100 million. If that much money came to me, I’d spend it all within days.

There are many ways to connect with the business world through bribes and payoffs, and many ways to invest in the future.

There’s no time to spend money on an office or a home when even pennies are of use.

The 100 million invested upfront can come back to you in a few years or a few decades, transformed into an unimaginable magnitude of money.

And if it comes with the title of the most powerful man in this country at the end of the line, that would be perfect.

“So, what are you doing here?”

“I’m here to help you, just like Naoe-sensei said.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“That won’t do. I was one of the people who heard about the project. I don’t mind Ayanokōji-san taking the big credit, but I’m also one of the people who-”

Kamogawa lives a clumsy and shitty life, but I can understand his

desire to take credit. It's true that it's a rare opportunity. But being a member of the Japanese Parliament is a profession where the concept of breaks or days off basically doesn't exist. They are part-time *Tokubetsushoku*[7]

Once the Japanese Parliament is in session, he has to participate in policy study groups in the Civic Party. Most of his schedule is filled up with support group meetings, dealing with visitors to the petitioners, political affairs, and official duties.

"Will you be of any help?"

"I'll stand up for you. I'm the son of Kamogawa Toshizou, after all."

Your father hasn't made a name for himself in the world of politics.

However, we can't ignore the notice from Naoe-sensei so easily, can we?

"Then you can be as useful as you wish. I have a job for you."

Kamogawa's eyes lit up, having never been assigned to a role of any significance before.

"What kind of work?"

"It's essential to secure an experimental facility for the project. You'll be in charge of selecting the site, size, budget, and whether it can be secluded. If it works out, you'll get the next job. You want to be a good councilman that Naoe-sensei will recognize, don't you?"

"I see. That's certainly something that can't be avoided, isn't it?

"Even if we can't reach the scale of a high school, we will increase the number of children every year. This means that a reasonable space is naturally required. It's also important to maintain anonymity."

This project cannot be advertised too publicly.

We can't have the press writing about the dangerous education of infants and toddlers.

"From a budgetary point of view, it's inevitably going to be in the countryside, isn't it?"

Kamogawa's face changed.

He's a man who has been apathetic, but he isn't content being called a second-generation worker. Give him the right job and the right words of praise, and he might be of some use. No, I hope I'm right.

"Okay. I'll try."

"That's good. That's the best I've ever seen you look."

"Oh, yeah?"

I gave him a few compliments, and his good-natured face immediately fell back into place.

"What are you going to do now?"

"To prepare the facility, money is the most important thing. I'm going to sta rt making preparations."

If we apply the conditions we've assumed, the amount of money needed for the initial start-up alone will be substantial.

If we take into account human resources, we would like to have 500 million.

If we want to afford a safety net, we will need more than 600-700 million…

“You mean you’re going to tell people about this project and get them to invest in it, right?”

“Of course that’s what I’m trying to do.”

“Wouldn’t they be happy to give their children a gifted education?”

This guy really doesn’t know what he’s doing.

Who’s going to fund a project that’s still in the conceptual stage—just a few pieces of paper?

In the first place, the amount of money that these wealthy people are willing to contribute is not something that's easy to come by.

Of course, as a politician, you can't accept donations outwardly, so it would be necessary to follow the procedure of making donations to organizations such as supporters' associations.

There's a limit to the number of donations, but it is difficult to find a politician who follows such a rule to the tee. There are many ways to bypass donations, and many loopholes to do so.

But even on a piece of paper like this, if Naoe-sensei says, 'I'll do it,' a lot of money will come out of nowhere.

Since that isn't available, it's imperative to find one big financier first.

Even if he doesn't have the same kind of charismatic power as Naoe-sensei, we have to make him think so if he's going to invest in the project.

If he does, it isn't impossible to raise close to 500 million yen.

I sent Kamogawa to work as if I was kicking him out of the office and took out three bank books from my desk. There were deposits from three companies, including a regional bank.

"All of them are… a little less than 10 million."

It's not much to go on, but I guess I'll have to take my chances with this money.

1

An upscale residential area in Shirokane, Minato-ku.

In a corner of the area, a large historical mansion stands out.

The exterior of the house does not look old at all, as if it has been repeatedly renovated with a lot of money. A mere politician would never be able to live there.

There are several surveillance cameras installed at the entrance of the house, which gives the house a mysterious atmosphere.

After checking the magnificent nameplate “Sakayanagi” with a sideways glance, I pressed the doorbell and the first person to answer the door was an elderly man who appeared to be a servant of the mansion.

Since I had already made an appointment with him, I was allowed to pass through the gate without any trouble.

The spacious tatami mats, which smelled of rush grass, didn’t seem to be damaged.

It was obvious at a glance that the tatami mats were regularly reupholstered and that a lot of money had been spent in this area.

Going further into the room, a western-style room was revealed, and we were told to sit on the sofa and wait for the next meeting.

I thought about how I should behave toward the people I’m about to meet.

I choose to sit on the sofa and wait without hesitation.

As someone who works for Naoe-sensei, who has a project for the future, I have no intention of making myself look small.

As I stare at the steam from the tea that eventually arrived, the person I was waiting for appeared.

“Thank you for waiting.”

The first impression I got instantly was of a thin, slender man.

He had a quiet voice and didn't have the arrogant attitude that many rich people have.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Ayanokōji. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me."

His demeanor was unassuming, but with the bare minimum of courtesy.

The fact remains that I'm the interloper and the one making the request.

"I'm Sakayanagi. I have heard about you from Naoe-sensei several times."

"I hope he didn't say anything bad."

"No, not at all. He said that you're a very talented person. And when I heard that you're the same age as me, I felt a sense of embarrassment."

For a man who's been walking down the winner's track since birth, why would he care about the people below him? If he's just being modest, I'll give him credit for being a good liar in his own way.

"Thank you very much. But I hear that you're also quite famous."

First of all, I would like to confirm the authenticity of Sakayanagi's humanity and truthfulness.

"No, I still have a long way to go. My father was great, but that's really all there is to it."

He didn't take advantage of my compliments and smiled bitterly as if he was troubled.

We continued to exchange probing words for a while, but this impression didn't change. Since he showed no sign of wanting to end the conversation, I thought it would be better for me to step in.

"The reason I'm here is because I remembered that Naoe-sensei had told me that I should turn to you when I have a problem. I'm ashamed to say that I came here to ask you for help."

Rich people don't welcome such a way of starting a conversation.

This is because money is at the root of most of their problems.

They want to invest, start a business, and so on, but they don't have the capital.

"How can I help you?"

Sakayanagi's face changed slightly, though he didn't seem alarmed.

"I'm thinking of starting up a project. But I'll need a lot of money to carry it out."

"I see. So what issue do you have for me…? No, I think you came to ask me for a favor."

"I'm not asking to receive money from you, whom I've never met before. However, I would like to ask you to do something similar. I would like you to act as a liaison between me and the business world."

I pulled out a new document from a clear file that I've prepared

myself and presented it to him.

Sakayanagi didn't reach for it, however, and kept looking at me instead.

Although I can't read his expression, I assume that he's still wary of me.

No, he must be.

Even though he's heard of me by name, I was a stranger to him.

I'm not a politician, nor am I known to the public.

If I were a stranger to Sakayanagi, he wouldn't easily read my files.

It's the rich man's fate to get into trouble if he finds out about it.

"I see. You're not asking me for a loan, are you?"

Yes. I can't just barge in and ask him to give us money. Of course, the only reason for my being here is to get him to approve our project. The important thing is not to bow down and ask for money, but to convince many people to invest in the project.

However, if I don't even have the opportunity to propose that, it'll end up being an impracticable theory on the table.

"We want to start this project to save the lives of as many children as possible and to provide them with a proper education. I believe that we can provide such a facility with your help. I'm one of many that were strongly impressed by the Advanced Nurturing High School that your father realized."

Children, education, life.

It's inevitable that these words would stick in Sakayanagi's mind.

This man's father is in charge of high school education and is truly a leader who guides children.

When it comes to children, he will not allow any lax loopholes here where he does not even look at them.

"Then, shouldn't you consult with my father instead of me?"

"That may be the right course of action, but the world of politics is not so simple. Kijima-sensei is the one who introduced the existence of the Advanced Nurturing High School to the world. Your father must have had a close relationship with him. If that's the case, how can I, a member of the Naoe faction, a rival of Kijima-sensei, ask for his advice?"

"Did you ever consider the possibility that I might be on good terms with Kijima-sensei?"

"Of course it is possible, but I've never heard anything about it. I just thought I'd take a chance."

There are some lies in my story, but most of it's true. Even if this man's father is a powerful individual who knows what he's talking about, we can't tell him what we're planning since he's a member of the Kijima faction.

"Let me ask you frankly. You do not want Kijima-sensei to know

about this information, do you? Is that correct?"

"I don't deny that."

"If that's the case, then I'm a little confused. Ayanokōji-sensei doesn't know whether I'm on Kijima-sensei's side, Naoe-sensei's side or neutral. Are you sure you are willing to share such a plan with us? If I look through the material, I'll get information. I don't think you know who you're talking to."

"That's true. If you were to say that it's because you trust me, who you have been speaking to for but a few minutes, then that would be a bad joke."

Sakayanagi nodded without hiding.

“However, there is one thing I believe in as a politician, and that is that I have full trust in Naoe-sensei. Naoe-sensei knows the weight of words. If you were the kind of person who would divulge this to Kijima-sensei or your own father, Naoe-sensei would never advise me to turn to you in a time of need.”

“…You trust Naoe-sensei, don’t you?”

“Most politicians will join one faction or another in the near future. No matter what faction you are in, once you have decided to support a particular person, you just have to trust them til the end. I don’t think there should be a shred of doubt in that.”

“I see… Naoe-sensei has you by his side.”

Sakayanagi said happily and sat back down a little deeper.

“As you know, my father has a close relationship with Kijima-sensei. Did you ever wonder about my connection with the Naoe-sensei?”

“Of course, it’s not that I have not wondered,” I said.

“I respect my father and I see him as my goal at the same time. I don’t know if I will follow the same path or a different one, but I want to at least explore different possibilities. That’s why I’m learning with Naoe-sensei, who’s considered a good opponent to Kijima-sensei. My father doesn’t oppose this, but rather silently supports me.”

“You seem to be very open-minded that even your enemies agree to help spread your knowledge. And at the same time, he seems to trust you to keep your mouth shut.”

In a position like this man’s, it would be likely that he would follow in his father’s footsteps.

When you have a relationship with a hostile organization, you have the opportunity to obtain information about them, but you also have the risk of passing some onto them as well.

However, it’s true that Sakayanagi has gained Naoe-sensei’s trust, as shown by how he likes him.

“Which is why I’m now more convinced of this. I hope you will take a look at it.”

“I was going to ask you to leave as soon as possible depending on

what you wanted, but that's no longer the case."

"I certainly appreciate your spirit and belief. I will take a look."

Finally, Sakayanagi picked up the material and looked it over.

After reading through them, Sakayanagi muttered without thinking deeply.

"It's true that hundreds of children are abandoned every year in Japan. I don't accept that reality, and it's not a bad thing that politicians are trying to do something about it. In fact, we should welcome it."

"You mean you sympathize with them?"

“Of course I sympathize with them. This is exactly the kind of issue that should be on the agenda of the government, not a private citizen like me… I hope that you will take up this issue and work on countermeasures.”

“If I could do that, I would. But the country’s mechanics are not so simple. The issue with the abandonment of children has not been eliminated. There are still children in single-mother families, single-father families, and poor families who cannot receive the education they seek, and the cycle of poverty shows no sign of stopping; additionally, the disparity in society continues to widen. Is that right?”

“…Yes, that’s right.”

“If you watch TV, you would know that mothers who give birth secretly in restrooms at train stations have to be buried in the dark. This is not an uncommon story. The law isn’t well established and the situation isn’t acceptable,

I can only imagine how regretful it must be for a mother to end her child’s life out of concern for the public’s opinion. Of course, there are those who can be ruthless against unwanted births, but not all of them willingly want to become criminals. If there’s a generous place where people can help with open arms, the number of people who grieve will be minimized.”

If this project comes to fruition, it could save the lives of 10, 20, and eventually over 100 children. No, it will be more than that.

“I’m sure that you, who’s closer to our side, understand that being a politician doesn’t mean that everything goes as you wish. Whether you’re a member of the Japanese Parliament or a local councilor, your title states that you enact laws, decide budgets, and enact ordinances, but no one listens to young politicians while those who hold the real power work for their own personal agendas. Or do I… No, you want me to continue to forsake the lives of children until I’ve been a leading politician for 20 or 30 years and have a say in the matter?”

Sakayanagi, who’s currently listening, would feel just as guilty for his inaction.

I will emphasize that strongly.

“But… still you’re a congressman. You’re the one who should face

the country and fight against it. How are you going to proceed if you don't put this on the country's agenda in the first place?"

"We're politicians and civil servants, but we're also *Tokubetsushoku*.

> We don't intend to make a profit, but we can move in any way we want."

"You work privately to save children?"

"I believe that now that Naoe-sensei is paying attention to you, and now that you've started your career as a politician, the people around you will listen to your voice. That's why I believe that having you build a pipeline to the business world will be a step toward realizing this goal."

“It’s true that, unlike ordinary people, the color in people’s eyes changes just because you’re a politician. If what’s written in this project can be realized, there may be people who’ll raise their hands…”

Being the second generation to a great father, this man is at least far more capable than Kamogawa and others.

While he shows a good-natured side, he refuses to give easy answers.

“There are ways to raise funds. As you said, you’re allowed to work on the side, right? We can appeal not only to the domestic market but also to the world by sending out messages on the Internet.”

“You want me to appeal to the fact that our country’s laws aren’t keeping up with the current times? It would be a disgrace to Naoe-sensei’s face, not mine. This is a matter that needs to be pursued in the strictest confidentiality at this stage. That’s why we need the help of people in the business world. We need your help.”

“…We’re willing to introduce you to people in the business world. But whether it will really work or not is another matter.”

People won’t be pleased if only the beautiful aspects are laid out. They would be rather wary.

“So what do you think we should do?”

“Don’t lie…expose all of your thoughts and objectives, Ayanokōji-san.”

If we could do that, we would have no trouble.

“I understand that it’s difficult to comprehend. But I’m not thinking about making a profit at all, it’s enough if I can save the children.

It’s not like I want any credit, would you believe such a person?”

Certainly, I would laugh it off if such an individual appeared in front of me.

“He wants status and honor, he wants to make money. That’s why he saves children. It’s a blunt way of putting it, but I think many will be more likely to believe me if someone said this. And you’re a member of the Japanese Parliament. If they know that this is the

foundation for aiming higher, I think some of them will think that they will receive great interest when you eventually become a big shot."

"…Indeed."

"Of course, it would be better for the children if there were no self-interest at all, that is unquestionably the ideal, but… What are you looking for, and what are you trying to achieve with this project?"

"Status, honor, and money—certainly indispensable things you'll want eventually."

It's absolutely necessary, as this man says.

But there's a big reason why I'm interested in this project.

“Japan cannot compete with the rest of the world as it is now. However, we cannot catch up with the global world if we just watch how the top countries develop their human resources. That’s why we want to give a thorough education to our children and raise them to be geniuses who can compete with the world. That’s what we believe. We don’t just save lives. I want to turn those lives into something of high value in this world—that is my true purpose.”

The forced rescues and education—this can be hard for the world to accept.

“A child’s education is left to the parents. You believe that children whose parents were absent could be raised and educated for your ideals.”

“It’s not for me. It’s for the future of Japan.”

The Japan which rose in the aftermath of war and bubble economy is gone and is now on its descent.

Japan has already been ridiculed as one of the still developing countries, and we must put an end to this situation.

“What do you think when you only see elderly politicians? Would you believe that these old people, who are over 70 or 80 years old, have any real feelings for Japan? All they care about is what they can do while they’re alive. I, too, may change my mindset to such a problematic attitude. But not now. Now, as a representative of the youth, I’m concerned about the future and want to save it. That’s why we must take action as soon as possible.”

I found myself speaking passionately.

Was I misled by this man’s shrewd thinking, or did my instincts as a politician kick in?

“Does Naoe-sensei know about this?”

“No. This is all my personal opinion.”

I can’t confirm here.

But Sakayanagi seemed to understand and nodded once after looking me in the eye.

“It seems that my father’s and my educational philosophy and your

philosophy are very different. However, that isn't a bad thing. In fact, it's one of the most important approaches. It's an important case to judge which is right. The situation is very similar to how I'm standing near Naoe-sensei right now."

The man's father is in charge of the Advanced Nurturing High School.

It's certainly one of the newest endeavors.

But as Sakayanagi says, it's very different from my policy.

"As you wish, I will introduce you. But I have one condition."

"What would that be?"

"When this project actually comes to fruition, please let me stand by and watch how you execute it."

"Is that really all you want?"

"That is very important to me. I will learn a lot from you."

"I promise you. Once the facility is actually built, you'll be free to come and go as you please. All I ask of you is for you to see the results of your work."

It's a small price to pay for a connection to the business world.

Besides, I'm also interested in many things, such as the structure of the Advanced Nurturing High School.

I also may be able to find out some information about Naoe-sensei's rival Kijima-sensei.

Information is power, whether it's for our friends or enemies.

But I wonder if it'll go so easily.

The man in front of me is beaming from start to finish, and even though he has some negative opinions, he seems to be on our side from the very beginning.

Is there any possibility that there's more to it than what meets the eye?

Just because Naoe-sensei recommended this project doesn't guarantee that there isn't another person behind it.

If what we're trying to do gets leaked due to this man…

I may have rushed to get the money, but I may have overstepped the mark a bit.

Even though I've done some research on this man in advance, I haven't been able to examine him as closely as usual due to lack of time. It's dangerous to lean on faith…

But we constantly have to be prepared to take this kind of risk and deal with the outcomes.

"If you'd like, I'd be happy to have dinner with you soon. I'd love to hear more about your high school education."

"I was also hoping to hear from you about politics in addition to this project. I would be happy to go out with you."

The invitation to dinner and other events makes a mere shallow relationship seem more realistic.

Let's go for round two.

2

When I woke up, the stains on the dingy ceiling appeared to be shaking and shaking.

“I must have had too much to drink these days…”

As I lay there in a daze, unable to muster the energy to get up, the chime rang three times at short intervals.

Perhaps noticing that the door was unlocked, the visitor came in without hesitation.

Kamogawa, who had not been heard from for about two weeks, came to the office breathlessly.

“Ayanokōji-san, wake up! We’ve found the perfect place for you!”

“…Don’t make too much noise.”

In combination with my lack of sleep, I feel as if he’s shouting at me through a loudspeaker.

With ringing in my ears, I have no choice but to get up and receive Kamogawa’s report.

“You reek of alcohol. I envy you. Where did you have such a good meal?”

“Drinking alcohol is my job, it’s a constant struggle. I don’t have the nerve to think it’s fun.”

If you think I was drinking cheaply with women, you’re naive.

Even if you become a politician, you can’t act like a big shot, and you have to repeatedly bow and pour drinks for your superiors. It’s no different from the daily life of businessmen.

Kamogawa’s report contains a document on the property where the project will take place.

“Saitama, huh? That’s your hometown, isn’t it?”

It wasn’t surprising; it would be unrealistic to have it set in Tokyo with its high land prices.

“Yes. There used to be a factory of a pharmaceutical company deep in the mountains, but after the pollution problem was reported a few decades ago, sales dropped and the company went bankrupt a couple of years ago. Though, the factory wasn’t demolished and still remains today. The site is neither too large nor too small, and seems to be an ideal place to carry out the project.”

I put the documents on my desk and used my computer to view the map and confirm the specific location.

In this day and age, it’s nice to be able to get the information you want in real time wherever you are.

The ideal location is more than an hour away from the nearest station, and there's no bus service in the area.

The site also includes prices for both renting and buying. It seems that one can choose to lease the property and then buy it after a few years, although the price is a little expensive.

Well, the interval and price can be varied depending on the negotiation.

"But aren't you being ripped off at 2.4 million? There's a similar place 30 minutes from the station for 2.5 million. I think there's room for more negotiation.

"I think they're just exploring first."

It's not easy for this place to find tenants so it shouldn't be difficult to get them to desire us renting it out without directly asking for it.

If it's a long-term contract, there's a possibility that the other side will agree to substantially reduce the price.

"Isn't this a nice place?"

"You seem very enthusiastic. What's your budget estimate for renovation work, etc.?"

"Here it is!"

He pulled another document out of his bag and held it out to me.

It seems that he at least has the ability to think and act.

Looks like all the minimum items required for the construction have been accounted for.

And even the 3D modeling was done.

"You did this too?"

"Yes. I asked a friend of mine who works in the construction industry. Of course, I never told him about this project… What do you think?"

"Not bad. But there's no need for any extra paint. I'm not going to spend money on beautification."

“You are pretty thorough on cutting the costs, right?”

“I’ll make sure it looks good when I get the money.”

“I’ll try to take that into consideration when I arrange it.”

The first step is to get the project back on track.

But we also need results.

“Well done for now. I’d like to contact the owner of this property as soon as possible.”

“What about the intermediary? Should we skip it?”

“No, since we already have an intermediary, it would be counterproductive to try any tricks. It would be better to move them to our side.”

“Understood.”

We need to continue to look for the second and third candidates, but I’d like to make a decision all at once if possible.

“Assuming all goes well… What about the children? Even if you have the money, facilities, and educators ready, what are you going to do without the children?”

Of course, we’re working on that point in parallel.

“Don’t worry. We’ve got it all figured out.”

“What do you mean, you have an idea? Please tell me exactly what you have in mind. I’m part of the project.”

I gave Kamogawa a glare as he looked at me expectantly.

“There are some things in this world that’s better to be ignorant of. If you carelessly find out, I won’t be able to help you if something happens. Are you prepared to spend years, if not decades, in prison?”

“No. No… not at all…!”

That wasn’t a threat. In fact, I’ve started working behind the scenes on a plan that’ll get me out in a heartbeat if everything gets leaked. I can’t let Kamogawa get involved in this matter.

It’s not to protect Kamogawa, but to protect me. If this guy gets taken by the police, it’ll be impossible for him to keep evading a serious interrogation.

And besides, they won’t keep quiet about it, either.

“Don’t worry, though, there are plenty of ways to get children.”

Normally, newborns born to unidentified parents are sent to an orphanage or children’s home through a child guidance center. Then, they’re adopted or found by foster parents.

Whether the life that follows is happy or not, even if the child is raised by their own parents, only depends on whether or not they’re provided with a favorable environment. There’s nothing wrong with an intermediary agency, as long as it has the means to secure the newborn.

“I wish there were easier and simpler ways to obtain children, it’s not something I can’t talk to you about, but it’s still difficult to do right now. Even if you were to be straightforward about it, from their point of view you would still be strangers… And even if they knew you’re a politician, they wouldn’t hand over the child easily.”

“Is that how it is?”

It’s true that mothers may be willing to give up their newborns if they’re offered generous protection, government favor, and a few other nice words.

However, we must assume that this won’t be the case.

“Isn’t there a way to take children from an orphanage?”

“There are no orphanages in Japan. To be more exact, they are called Child Care Facilities. And in the case of newborn babies, which is what I’m looking for, they’re called infant homes, not Child Care Facilities. But it’s inevitable that they’ll be suspicious of us, too. It’s a matter of life.”

"…I see."

It's not surprising that people in general life are not concerned about this kind of thing.

Until today, Kamogawa would've had his hands full listing potential sites.

"Of course, we're going to try to find an infant home," he said. "but only after we get the institution's operation on track and officially declare it a government-led project."

But eventually, the real mission will be to set up and provide a place for the children themselves.

We'll either buy out the director of the obstetrics and gynecology department or, if that doesn't happen, open an obstetrics and gynecology clinic.

Finding a doctor who sells his soul to the devil isn't that hard.

I showed Kamogawa the concrete plan on the computer screen as I explained it to him.

We are to create a place for mothers who cannot take care of their children.

This way, there's no need for anyone to interfere.

The day of birth from the mother's womb is counted as day 0, and babies under 28 days old are called "newborns", but from newborns to 3 months old are taken in secret. The mothers are not held responsible but instead sign a contract not to have anything to do with the child.

The children are raised under strict physical supervision until they reach six months of age, at which point they're placed in an educational program.

"So you're prepared to abandon a perfect education for the first few years?"

"Don't be ridiculous. We give them a thorough education from the first year, regardless of whether they have money or not."

"You're naive if you think that half-baked achievements will move the political and business worlds, Kamogawa."

They also educate their own flesh and blood from an early age. If they're not able to show an overwhelming difference in ability, the credibility of this institution will be shaken.

The children must be the best in both intelligence and physical ability.

"The more samples we have, the better… whether it's one person or twenty, we'll accept them anyway."

No matter how many people are destroyed, it doesn't matter as long as the reality is covered up.

If there are 10 survivors, just pretend that there were 10 from the beginning.

That shows the competence of the educational institution.

"But how can you educate infants? They don't even speak the language, do they?"

"Have you ever heard of baby signing?"

“Baby signing? What’s that?”

“As you say, infants can’t even speak. Baby signing is a language designed to communicate using gestures. Brain development and muscle growth are essential for learning and handling words, but hands and fingers develop much faster than that.”

Of course, it’ll be difficult for the baby to understand those signs until the child is around six months old.

“Haha…”

“This means that babies are much more intelligent than we adults think. If you don’t teach them, all they can do is cry, but if they learn baby signs, they can tell adults why they’re crying.”

This project goes beyond that.

The ultimate form of early learning. From the moment a child is born, they’re given a thorough education.

That’s the purpose of this project.

3

We've secured a chance to gain connections with the business world.

However, there's no way that we'll be able to get anyone to invest money in our project if they just go in with no idea what we're doing.

It's become a standard practice since I entered this world to prepare in advance, the most important thing there is to do.

A room in a building within Kabukicho's center.

On this particular night, I was alone in this place.

I visit this cabaret club two or three times a month when I need to think.

Although this business is becoming obsolete, it's still in high demand, especially among the elderly.

They're inseparable in the world of politics.

"Welcome, Ayanokōji-sama!"

A familiar black-clad boy welcomed me and quickly guided me into the restaurant.

"Is Mika here?"

"Yes, she's at work. She told me that you'd be here soon."

"It turned out to be right. Please come this way."

I was shown to the VIP room at the back of the restaurant.

In the room, there were already a few bottles and some snacks.

It's clear that preparations are already underway even before you arrive at the restaurant.

"Please wait a moment, sir."

The boy bowed his head and left the room.

As I silently sat down on the luxurious sofa, a wave of exhaustion

washed over me.

I didn't even have the energy to reach for my drink, so I just leaned back against the backrest.

"Whew…"

I sighed deeply, a little surprised at myself.

I haven't had a good night's sleep recently.

The pressure of the Human Resource Development Project that I was suddenly put in charge of and the heavy responsibility that lurks behind it.

It's a life-threatening job that I cannot afford to fail even in the slightest.

We have a good idea of where the educational facility will be located, but we don't have enough funds to secure it, nor have we found the right educators. In addition, we'll need a lot of manpower to operate the facility.

It's also necessary to gather a group of well-spoken individuals and to brainstorm a system to prevent them from leaking information to the outside world.

Naturally, more money is needed for this.

"Money, money, money or…"

The opportunity to receive funding has been provided through Sakayanagi, but what will actually happen is not yet known.

"I don't know what'll happen…"

I closed my eyes, unable to stand the oncoming drowsiness.

Biting the difference between my body and the hard fabric of my office, I lay down to rest. I wonder how much time has passed since then.

A minute, an hour.

When I opened my eyes to wake up unexpectedly, I saw a face peering at me from the side.

Familiar large eyes and lips.

The way she always looks at me.

"Are you awake?"

"…How long have I been asleep?"

I lifted myself from the couch and poured myself a glass of whiskey to wake myself up.

"Maybe 10 minutes. You must be very tired."

Only 10 minutes. But I felt a little lighter in those 10 minutes.

"Do you want me to make you some tea or water?"

"No, I feel better when I drink something like this."

Mika nodded in amazement, added some more alcohol and wiped the water from the glass in a familiar manner.

"I have a favor to ask you."

“That’s the first thing you get up and talk about? Why don’t you forget about work for a minute?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

The glass in my hand is clenched in a natural grip.

“I know your work is important to you.”

“There’s no line between important and unimportant work. Nothing’s allowed to be unaccounted for.”

For me, even picking chestnuts out of a fire is an important task.

“It’s hard being a politician. From what I see on TV, they’re falling asleep in the Japanese Parliament, they’re accused of corruption, they’re accused of philandering, and so on. There are very few people who seem to be doing their jobs properly.”

That’s how the world of politics looks to the average person, huh?

The ruling party and the opposition party are supposed to be doing their job which seemingly comprises of them shouting abuse at each other like children.

“It’s good for me. As long as the top echelon is sane, there’s no room for me.”

With so many old politicians in power, I’m able to take advantage of the few open seats.

“I think you’d make a great politician, Atsuomi.”

She says, gently placing her palm on my thigh.

“How can a woman who knows nothing about politics say that?”

“I don’t know anything about politics, but I do have a good eye for men.”

Mika, beside me, moved to Tokyo right after graduating from junior high, and after moving from job to job, she threw herself into the world of cabarets. With her good looks and unassuming attitude, she quickly worked her way up to the number two spot at this bar.

She met me when she was looking for a restaurant to entertain a member of the Japanese Parliament, and we developed a relationship.

We were lovers for a while, but that was a long time ago.

We haven’t broken off the relationship at the time not only because of the physical aspect of our relationship but also because she was a capable person in her field.

Knowing how to use her weapons, Mika had close relationships with several men who were at the core of the ruling and opposition parties. Mika is a young, beautiful woman who’s capable of only adult relationships that don’t harm her family. Politicians have many secrets. The more secrets one has, the more one wants to tell them, and the heavier they are.

Politicians are wary of smart women. On the other hand, they’re less cautious of women who aren’t so quick on the uptake.

If a woman responds with a knowing but unknowing “huh” when any secret is divulged, pillow talk will be encouraged. If you are a little too flippant and say something unnecessary, you don’t have to

worry if the other person doesn't remember.

But this Mika is different. She had no knowledge, but she had at least a little bit of intellect.

She knew that every politician's statement was worth money, and she knew how to record it in any way she could.

And it all started when she demanded the number one position and money in exchange for her help.

And not only to take down the number one, but also with the hope that she would be thoroughly destroyed. In response to the obvious price, I drugged and eliminated the woman who was number one at the time.

I'm sure if she's now somewhere getting a small fortune by dealing with dirty customers.

Since then, the relationship has deepened and both sides have maintained our hold on each other.

"I'd like to get to know some of them."

I laid out on the table the photos of the seven people I've picked out from the business world.

"Do any of these faces look familiar to you, or do you think you can pull some strings?"

"I don't know. I don't think any of them have shown up at our establishment… but I think I've seen this guy at one of our sites… Wait a minute, let me check. What's his name?"

"Sonezaki."

As if to jog her memory, Mika called somewhere on her cell phone.

"Oh, hello, Sophia? I have a question for you… Do you know a customer named Sonezaki-san?"

After a while of chatting among friends, Mika ended the call and nodded.

"Bingo. There was a big customer who was crazy about Sophia."

"Well, that's a good thing. Can't we use it to our advantage?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"This Sonezaki is married with two daughters in middle school. It's natural for a wealthy man to play with women, but he wouldn't want his family to know about the affair."

"Simple as that."

"As for the rest of the people, hit them as hard as you can."

Okay.

"And one more thing. I'd like you to get close to Sasada as well. He seems to be getting himself into a position of some sort these days. I'd

like to get a hold of one or two of his weaknesses."

"…Sasada, right? Why?"

Mika's face didn't hide her disgust at the mention of Sasada's name.

"I don't like pricks who touch me without permission, do you?"

"Are they crazy about you?"

"He's even offered me money if I spend the night with him."

"That's good. Give him what he wants. I'll extract more money than he expects."

A weapon no man could ever have. It's a simple and effective strategy.

"How much will you pay me?"

"Results will be what you expect. Have I ever made you a promise I didn't keep?"

“Okay. I don’t like this, but I’ll make it work.”

“And don’t forget to take care of Naoe-sensei. He thinks very highly of you.”

“…I don’t know.”

For the first time, Mika’s expression turned dark.

“It’s kind of… hard to see his true heart no matter how many times you get close to him.”

She took a hand towel and started to fold it at random.

This is a habit that Mika resorts to in order to distract her mind when she is talking about something she doesn’t like.

“He’s an old man in my eyes, but he has an aura that contradicts that.”

“Just as you’d expect. You’re just like Naoe-sensei.”

Don’t be fooled by his old appearance.

“Be careful. I don’t want you to get swallowed up.”

“I can’t tell you how many guys I’ve given that to.”

I took a handful of bills out of my wallet and put them in a mess on the table.

“Keep it.”

“Are you leaving already? I’ve got time.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have any to spare.”

Drinking and women are just indulgences, nothing more, nothing less.

They will come with time.

The important thing now is to execute the project perfectly and make a name for yourself in the Naoe faction.

4

A few months later, I was in my office, looking at the finished photos of the building that had just been renovated.

The floors, ceilings, walls, and everything else are all white. The reason for the monochromatic color scheme is to give the impression of a clean facility.

Purity, innocence, cleanliness, and sanctity are some of the strong positive images that are connected to the color white. Many government officials will eventually visit the school to inspect the education that will take place here.

It's a little image strategy, but it's an element that shouldn't be underestimated.

"Good morning, Ayanokōji-san."

"Oh!"

Kamogawa and his engineer are at the site in Saitama for a final check, board in hand, to make sure everything's in order. The work seemed to have come to an end, and he returned to the office with a look of relief on his face.

"All the work is complete," he said.

"You did a good job. It looks like the facility turned out exactly as I had imagined."

"But how did you manage to renovate it so beautifully with that budget? Normally it would've cost almost twice as much."

"There are many construction companies constantly searching for dust when you knock on their door."

If you whisper sweet nothings in their ears along with your threats, they will cooperate with you without regard to profit.

"It's getting real now, isn't it? The Human Resources Development Project."

"Yes, it is."

“That’s because you were able to get people in the business world to cooperate, Ayanokōji-san. It’s quite an accomplishment to raise nearly 400 million yen in one night.”

The 400 million was invested in the educators, the land, the buildings, and the construction of the facility itself.

Most of it is gone. It’s difficult to collect the money, but it’s effortless to spend it.

“They have a sickening amount of money, but they’re always hungry for honor and fame. If this project succeeds, they’ll get that in return. From the looks of the party, I’m sure they have a lot of deals like this going on behind the scenes.”

They're probably investing in several deals at the same time, including mine, and they only think of it as a profit if they win one of them. Some of them may have already forgotten that I exist.

"So you're saying they don't expect anything?"

"That's fine for now. It's risky to draw too much attention."

However, it's important to keep moving forward towards the future. In addition to the teachers, we must also secure the children who will receive the education.

"But first, we have to come up with a name for the facility that will be responsible for the Human Resource Development Project."

"Oh, really? What will you name it?"

"The White Room. The name will emphasize the image of white, which gives a sense of purity and will be pushed to the forefront."

"The White Room… Well, it's simple but easy to understand."

No matter who sees it, this place will be established as the white and pure name, as the name suggests..

"I hope that people like Naoe-sensei and many others will visit us soon."

Kamogawa is buoyant, but things aren't going to be that easy.

"Let me tell you something important, Kamogawa. The world of politics is not a simple binary of friend or foe. If you take the easy way out, you'll be in deep trouble."

"What…?"

He tilted his head plastered with a stupid look as if he didn't understand what I meant.

"Listen," I said, "you're not ready for this yet."

No matter how well things seem to be going, I'm still walking on a bridge that could collapse at any moment.

Kamogawa doesn't yet know the terror of walking on that bridge.

“What are you going to do after this?”

“I’m supposed to meet and interview a few people here today. We can’t run the White Room by ourselves.”

It’s impossible for amateurs to educate children out of the blue.

Kamogawa looked at his watch and lowered his head, looking a little disappointed.

He must’ve thought he was in the way since the interview time would be at 4:00 p.m.—in about 10 minutes.

“You should be there, too,” I said.

“Oh, you don’t mind, do you?”

“You’re in charge of the White Room. You have the right to know what kind of person you’re dealing with.”

With a gleeful gleam in his eye, Kamogawa hurriedly began to clean up.

Soon, about a minute before four o'clock, a knock came at the office.

"Come in."

Souya, a man dressed in a white lab coat, approached me with a light nod.

"I never thought that a stray researcher like me would be approached by a professor like you," he said with a wry smile.

He tried to shake my hand, but I looked down to it and lifted my gaze.

"I haven't said I'll hire you yet."

The man who appeared, Souya, used to be a doctor, but his medical license was revoked after a number of behavioral problems. After that, he began researching human growth and published a paper on the subject. Although he was highly regarded by some, he hasn't been able to return to the limelight because of his past history.

"Kamogawa, if you have any first impressions of him, just say so."

"I don't mind… do you?"

Kamogawa kept his mouth shut, trying not to intrude, but it was easy to see in his expression that he was holding back what he wanted to say.

"I want to hear your opinion."

"Um, excuse me, but why are you here in a white coat?"

"I don't know, you can't come here naked, right?"

"No, it's not that… I think it's common practice to wear a suit to an interview."

Souya looked at his own clothes and nodded somewhat unconvincingly, "I see."

"Isn't that a trivial matter? My formal attire is a white coat, so I

don’t see any problem. I would be taken more seriously in this than a suit.”

Souya replied without a trace of apology.

“Ah, Ayanokōji-san… What are you going to do?”

‘Are you going to hire a man like this?’ That’s what his eyes were saying.

He certainly has a lot of problems with his demeanor and his outfit, which doesn’t look like it was made for a job interview.

But neither is necessary for the kind of person the White Room is looking for.

“I’m not a licensed physician, but I’m proud to say that my background is impressive.”

“I don’t care about your background.”

It seems that this misconception needs to be put to rest first.

Then, for the first time, Souya’s nonchalant attitude hardened slightly.

“That’s enough… After all, you’re also going to criticize what I did, aren’t you? You said you would interview me regardless of my past problems, so I came here, but it seems it was a mistake.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions. I said it doesn’t matter what your history is. I’m talking about your entire career path. Which university you graduated from, which hospital you worked at, or what crimes you committed—I don’t care about any of that.”

Souya stopped just as he was about to get up from his seat.

“All I’m looking for is your present thoughts and abilities. You had a good point of view and skill as a doctor, and you had good insight into human beings. Are you still confident in your ability to do so?”

“I can tell most things by looking at a person. That hasn’t changed.”

For the first time, Souya showed his face as a researcher.

“It takes a certain amount of courage and determination to enter the illegal world. That’s all I wanted to see here. You can’t really judge whether it’s actually useful or not until you’re out in the field.”

“We don’t have the time to be so selective about personalities,” I said.

“…I beg your pardon.”

Souya bowed deeply, even though I didn’t ask him to.

“I’ve been laid off for a few years… eating away at my savings, and I’ve always been frustrated. I’ve been shutting myself off from the outside world.”

“You’ve regretted the mistakes you’ve made.”

“Regret? I have no regrets. I’m still sick to my stomach about why those people sold me out.”

He doesn’t think he did anything wrong. It’s human nature to have fallen into the wrong hands.

Kamogawa, who has led an earnest and mild-mannered life, must not be a good match for him.

“I’ll give you a chance to come back to life. From now on, you’ll

work for me as a former doctor and researcher, managing the subjects and helping them grow. Understood?”

This man with nowhere else to go has nothing to complain about as long as he’s employed at the same rate as before.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll make sure I won’t disappoint you.”

I told Souya on the spot that I’ll hire him, and left.

“I wonder if it’s really safe to hire a guy like that… I’m worried.”

“I understand what you’re saying… but it’s more for our own good.”

“Is that so?”

“He’s not close to anyone, he’s obsessed with money, and he doesn’t seek honor in the outside world. If you give him money and a place to work, he won’t betray you. It’s impossible here to make contact with outsiders and create profit from a third party.”

Of course, there’s a possibility that he’ll threaten us and demand higher wages, but if he acts to that extent, we won’t have to hesitate when dealing with him.

“He must’ve understood when he met me—I’m not someone you want to make enemies with.”

“I see…”

“We won’t be able to survive if we’re only concerned about that man. Not only Souya but all the potential employees were also fired for causing problems even though they were good at what they were doing.”

He isn’t a good person, but he’s a very reliable one.

In addition, we’ve prepared professionals in the field of studies, such as an obstetrician/gynecologist, an expert in ecology, and a coach who has trained Olympic athletes.

Of course, this is just the beginning. From here, we’ve expanded our reach and brought in geniuses in all kinds of fields to focus on the training of the children.

“Is it fine to not hear it in length? It will be difficult to determine how much work that can be done.”

“Detailed explanation is unnecessary. I don’t know anything about medicine or education. I’m going to emphasize to them that I’m always confident, and I’m going to hire the best I can get at any cost.”

“So you’re saying that the people who come for interviews are… almost guaranteed to be accepted?”

“That’s what I’m saying. That’s why it doesn’t matter if you’re there or not.”

In the sense of giving pressure, it can be seen that it’s somewhat useful.

There’s no limit to the amount of knowledge I can gain by studying

now.

It's best to put an expert in front of an expert than to have an amateur poke his nose in.

"Whether the guy who's coming in for an interview is capable of it or not, you can find the answer by letting the people you hire compete."

Another team of experts will analyze whether the education has produced results. If they do not find certain results, they'll be mercilessly decapitated.

5

“Oh, it’s over… I’m more tired than I thought.”

The interviews began at 4:00 p.m., but it was now well past 8:00 p.m. after meeting with a total of six people.

Kamogawa felt the overwhelming exhaustion.

There’s no doubt that each and every one of them’s a professional in their field. But as human beings, they were all so immature and nauseating.

One shouldn’t even think of having a decent conversation with them. It would be easy to hire everyone here today, but…

“What are you going to do?”

“We’ll hire Ishida and Souya, although they have strong attitude problems. Then Tabuchi, who I feel has the most sensibility. The rest have internal issues that outweigh their abilities so I’m not going to hire them this time.”

“I don’t care what he said, but his career and his way of thinking were great, weren’t they? I don’t understand it…”

However, it remains to be seen whether the project will start to work or not. I’m not sure I can get rid of my anxiety. Even if they were competent, I didn’t get the feeling that they were outstanding. Is this really the way to provide the best education?

“Let’s go out for dinner.”

Thinking about it isn’t going to help me, I should reset my head for the time being.

“In times like this, let’s go out and have a good time!”

I invited Kamogawa to dinner for a change of pace, and as soon as I got up from my seat, I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket.

“Ayanokōji-san, did you see something fall?”

He said, holding out to me a piece of paper he had picked up from the floor. It was a business card.

“Tsukishiro, huh?”

According to Naoe-sensei’s introduction, he’s a general contractor…

“Oh, he gave you his card, didn’t you? It’s a mess.”

“I might want to check it out and see how competent he is.”

“Oh, you’re going to call him? He had a scary smile, though.”

Despite his dubious title, Naoe-sensei would never let a useless person near him. I might try to get in touch with him.

I’ll try calling the number on the business card on my cell phone. If I can’t make a connection here, I can dismiss it as a dead end.

That was how I felt. I typed in the number, and after a few rings…

“I was expecting to hear from you, Ayanokōji-san.”

Based on the tone of his voice, the man who answered the phone without hesitation seemed to be Tsukishiro.

“How did you know it was me?”

I had never given him my number, and this was the first time I had ever called Tsukishiro.

“It was only natural that I’d look it up beforehand.”

“That bugs me.”

It’s not surprising to find out my phone number, since it’s something you can easily find out by asking around Naoe-sensei or his secretary. What I don’t like was that he acted as if he knew I was calling him.

“What has Naoe-sensei instilled into you?”

I don’t think it was just an introduction. I sensed intuitively that there was a set-up behind the scenes.

“I understand what you mean, but I can’t answer your question here.”

“You’re watching me to make sure I don’t mess up—is that what you’re doing?”

You can’t perceive the essence of what’s going on or what’s upsetting the other person just from their voice.

But at the same time, it would be a dangerous judgment.

This man Tsukishiro doesn’t seem to show his openings easily, at least as far as my intuition is concerned.

“If you don’t mind, can we meet soon? It may meet your expectations as well.”

While I was thinking about what to do, Tsukishiro made an invitation.

“What do you expect?”

“You called me because you have a problem, didn’t you?”

“You’re very confident, aren’t you? I haven’t said a word about it yet. If you raise your expectations too high, you may regret it.”

“I’m ready now if you need me.”

Now? He seems pretty sure. Or is there another reason? I’m wary of a trap, but I’m going to take him up on it.

“Then, now’s the time. Don’t tell me you can’t do it.”

“Of course not. What shall we do? I can come to you. You’re in your office, aren’t you?”

“You bastard.”

He even knows that I’m at the office right now?

“I think our conversation will go more smoothly if I come to you. I’ll give you an hour or so.”

“Suit yourself.”

Whether or not he was convinced that I would contact him is another matter, but I'm sure that Tsukishiro was and is aware of my surroundings.

This big project is always being kept in the loop with Naoe-sensei at the center.

"Um, what's going on?"

"I'm meeting Tsukishiro now."

"Oh, now? But I'm dining out with you…"

"You're on your own. I'll meet him alone."

With one foot in the project, Kamogawa's treasure trove of information.

His presence is a hindrance to us, since he may become our enemy.

6

An hour has passed since then. I waited outside the office to see how he would show up.

Nearly right on time, a black BMW showed up.

“I’ll park in the parking lot, please wait a moment.”

Tsukishiro rolled down the driver’s window, pulled into the parking lot, and returned.

“I didn’t know you were going to drive yourself.”

“Basically, I do most of my work alone. And I don’t like to let other people drive. It’s like putting your life in their hands.”

I thought he was exaggerating, but perhaps doing that serves the opposite of putting his life at risk. I sometimes think about what Tsukishiro said. I let Tsukishiro through to my office and sat him down somewhere appropriate.

“You said you might be able to meet my expectations, so do you know what I want?”

There was an eerie presence in the air alongside his constant smiling.

“Yes. It’s about the Human Resource Development Project, isn’t it?”

“You seem to know the details of everything, Naoe-sensei. So you didn’t intend to entrust the project to me alone from the beginning.”

That day, I thought Naoe-sensei entrusted the project only to me and Kamogawa. No, it was only my own fault for interpreting it that way. It was my first big project, and Naoe-sensei could not afford to make any mistakes, so it was natural to think that he was taking out an insurance policy.

“If I collapse, will you take over this project and be in charge of its execution?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

Of course, he wouldn’t give me a straight answer.

This man's age must not be so different from mine, but he seems to have a lot of experience with such work.

If that's the case, it's no wonder that he allowed Tsukishiro to supervise this project.

"No, no. I guess they'll just keep an eye out for another politician to take my place."

If Kamogawa and I fail, another politician will take over the project.

And Tsukishiro has always been observing and collected the big picture to report back to Naoe-sensei.

"Excellent. You got it half right, Ayanokōji-san."

"Half right?"

“Yes. I’ve been entrusted with two tasks, one of which is no different from what you’ve just described. The other is to assist the politician who’s been entrusted with the Human Resource Development Project.”

“Assistance?”

“A strong supporter. But you don’t seem to be pleased with it.”

It sounds good to have an assistant, but I’m supposed to be in charge of handling any failures as well.

“I don’t understand. I don’t think Naoe-sensei would rely on you, you’re not much older than me.”

“It’s true that I, like Ayanokōji-san, am a young man in the world of politics. However, supporters of big politicians are always valued even if they’re young, as long as they’re good at what they do. Well, in my case, I work with anyone, not only with politicians.”

Tsukishiro didn’t even try to hide his excellence.

It isn’t that he’s overly self-conscious. He’s confident based on his track record.

“Before I ask you to do a job, there’s something I want to confirm.”

“What is it?”

I pulled out this morning’s newspaper and pointed to an article in a small corner.

“Oarai town in Ibaraki prefecture. A body was found in the harbor here.”

“It’s not that unusual. People are dying every second all over Japan.”

“He’s a local reporter, but I know this man. He was a lone wolf who disliked the political world, mainly the ruling Citizen’s Party, and he once approached Naoe-sensei several times for an interview.”

“So? Is that relevant here and now?”

“Did you do this, Tsukishiro?”

“You’re asking very direct questions, Ayanokōji-san. Do you expect me to say yes?”

“That’s not important. What I want to know is whether or not this reporter was on Naoe-sensei when he met you at the ryotei the other day.”

Tsukishiro didn’t raise an eyebrow and looked down at the article in the newspaper.

“It seems he was trying to write a gossip article about Naoe-sensei. He has a wife and child, and he’s into young women. The Citizen’s Party’s image will inevitably be tarnished.”

Yes, that’s right. This was the real reason why this man was with Naoe-sensei at a ryotei the other day. He intentionally followed Naoe-sensei and identified and took out the reporter who was following him.

Of course, he would never admit it in front of me… I clenched my fist and slammed it down hard on the table.

“It’s not fear, is it? Oh no… I don’t think it’s anger, right?”

Tsukishiro, who had analyzed my behavior with interest, continued.

Certainly, fear, awe, and horror would be the natural response to this story. The creepy guy in front of me may have done away with a person as part of his job.

But I have no fear of Tsukishiro.

“Why wasn’t I given that job… That’s where the anger comes from, isn’t it?”

“It’s my job to do the dirty work. That’s what I’ve always done.”

One word from sensei and I’m confident I can do as good a job as this man.

“At least I wouldn’t do anything stupid that would allow them to find the body.”

“I understand that you’re very close to the Oba clan, Ayanokōji-san.”

You know us as well as we know you, don’t you?

“Then you should’ve known early on that I have nothing to fear from you.”

“The Oba clan isn’t a big organization, but they have a lot of thieves. I can imagine the trouble you must’ve gone through to establish a friendly relationship with them. But a body isn’t a body unless it’s found. A mere disappearance wouldn’t have chilled the hearts of the countless rats who keep an eye on the Naoe-sensei.”

In other words, it wasn’t that he failed to hide it, but that he deliberately let his corpse be found…

Whether Tsukishiro was involved in the death of the local reporter or not is no longer relevant.

I don’t think that reaching out my arm here grabbing him by the collar to threaten him would work.

The fact that I sense that means that his strategy is already working.

“I’m sorry to hear that, but that proves how much Naoe-sensei is putting into his Human Resource Development Project, and since he decided to select you, he didn’t want you to cross a dangerous bridge just to sink a reporter. Even if this one incident becomes a problem, it will only be someone else who will be blamed for it—someone who’s unknown.”

This man’s dangerous, but he’s good, and if he’s a quick talker when he knows what he’s doing.

I guess I’d have to be able to handle the man in front of me to reach the heights of success.

“I don’t like a lot of things about you, but it can’t be helped.”

“That’s the right answer. We should keep our personal feelings out of it.”

Any more chit-chat is a waste of time.

Let me cut to the chase.

“I was just now interviewing staff for the new institute. We’ve a good prospect of finding a certain number of people, but we’re still lacking a decisive factor. It’ll take time to find someone again.”

“You’re asking me to find someone for you? And quickly at that.”

“If you know of any. But I’m not looking for a half-assed job.”

“Don’t worry, I know someone who’s good enough to convince Ayanokōji-san.”

“Oh?”

“But whether I introduce them to you or not is another story. You know what I mean?”

Most of this world is business.

Whether you like them or not, whether your relationship is thick or thin, is meaningless.

“I know. How much?”

We have nothing to complain about if we get something in return for what we pay.

“The theory is that money’s the best solution, but I have my own policy. I’m willing to sit down and talk with potential clients. First of all, would you be willing to do it here?”

“That’s funny. Just a few minutes ago I was interviewing for a job, and now I’m on the receiving end.”

What a joke. But it’s foolish to throw away an opportunity for a little time and pride.

“All right. Do whatever you want.”

I’ll play along with Tsukishiro’s game and see if I can use him.

“Thank you very much.”

Tsukishiro took out a light blue clear file and pulls out some papers from it. I wonder if it was all calculated to bring us to this point.

“Ayanokōji Atsuomi, age 31. Male. Born in Aso City, Kumamoto Prefecture.”

“Wait a minute. Why do you need to confirm all that in an interview?”

“It’s important.”

He may not be joking, but his wan smile makes me want to vomit.

“You and I are equals. Or maybe we’re not even equal. You’re free now to decide what our hierarchy is, you decide. If you would rather swear in your gut, please feel free to say it out loud.”

He’s smiling, but I wonder how serious he is.

Though, I’ve already made my decision.

“I know that we have different, yet similar personalities. I haven’t been reserved in the past, but I was still held back due to my position being under Naoe-sensei. From now on, let me respond to you without reservation in the true sense of the word.”

“That’s better.”

After smirking, Tsukishiro began to speak again.

“I’ve followed your career as far as I could. Your life hasn’t been easy, and it seems that you had a poor and needy childhood.”

I’m not sure how much research he’d done, but he seems to have done a fair amount.

It was very likely that he was in contact with people who knew me as a child and student.

“I’ve also been able to find out about your family history. I understand that your parents abandoned you when you were very young and your paternal grandparents raised you.”

From the way he spoke, it seems that spouting out a poor lie would have the opposite effect.

“I have no parents, no money, and no decent house… I can’t help it if I’m judged that way.”

“No decent house? What kind of place did you live in?”

“A shack for farm equipment ran by the adults in the neighborhood. It had a crude tin roof and no electricity or gas. We took a bath only once or twice a week with hot water boiled in a cassette stove.”

This isn’t a past to be proud of, and to others, it may sound rather self-deprecating.

But I’m not pessimistic about my past.

I even think it’s given me a life of determination to rise to the top.

“My grandfather died when I was in middle school. But it was a turning point. We received a small amount of insurance money and my grandmother and I were able to buy an old house nearby and moved in.”

It wasn't the kind of house you'd want to live in.

However, I remember how happy I was to have such a big castle.

"Is your grandmother still alive?"

"No. She died when I was over 20, I think."

"That's very irresponsible of you."

"I didn't see her die, and I don't care about that. I was too busy living for myself."

I received one phone call from a distant, distant relative, but I didn't attend the funeral. I paid only the minimum expenses and let them take care of everything.

I don't even know where the grave is or where the remains of my grandfather and the others are buried.

"I see that after all the hard work she put into raising you, her end wasn't a good one."

"Hard—hard, huh? I don't know about that."

Of course, I know how hard it is to raise a child, though raising me was different.

"But it's true that it was all for naught. The son who was supposed to raise him with all his might abandoned him and disappeared, and the grandchild he left behind didn't even try to help her. For decades, they lived in poverty and never had the luxury of living in the lap of luxury."

If I had lived as my grandmother, I would've described it as a living hell.

"Looking at the situation objectively now, how does it feel? Does it hurt?"

"No. Nothing has changed. It's no more than that. My grandmother led the life of a loser and died a loser. At least if she'd abandoned me, her grandson, and made good use of my grandfather's insurance money, she'd have had a somewhat better life."

I have no intention of leading such a miserable life.

I can say that she was the closest thing I have to a role model.

"When did you decide to become a politician?"

"When I was a host, a woman who came as a guest told me a story — politicians can make money and gain power."

In fact, there were many members of the Japanese Parliament who played around at cabarets.

I started envying those people who were playing around with the money that was wrung out with the public's blood.

"You ran for office for the first time at the age of 25, but the number of votes you received was hopeless, and you failed miserably with the forfeiture of your deposit."

Tsukishiro read my profile containing his research.

“You announced your intention to run again when the House of Representatives was dissolved when you were at the age of 27, and Naoe-sensei took a liking to you and encouraged you to run again for the first time.”

“I admit that it was the most desperate time of my life. As a former host, I used women to get close to Naoe-sensei. Of course, that alone wouldn’t have won me his approval, but I’m proud to say that he bought my persistent contact, enthusiasm, and ambition.”

Tsukishiro nodded his head in satisfaction, though I expected him to dig deeper into the matter.

“Thank you very much for the details.”

Closing the file, Tsukishiro turned to face me.

“Fine. I accept you as my client.”

Saying this, Tsukishiro pulled out a new file.

“Wait! You’re going to accept me as a client just because of this?”

“You may lack some knowledge, but that isn’t important. You’re blessed! You can replace your brain and your body with any number of alternatives. What’s important are your ideas. Your ambition, tinged with evil, which you cannot hide, is a very good quality in a politician.”

I look down at the file in front of me.

“I’m sure you’ll find him a very capable man.”

Did he know that I contacted him because I wanted a researcher?

No, maybe Naoe-sensei is backing me up behind the scenes.

“How much?”

“Not this time. It would be best if you return the favor in the future with a big payout. You might make it big someday. That’s the main reason I decided to take the job.”

“Don’t make me laugh. How many politicians have you whispered the same thing to?”

Even this man, who claimed to have recognized my qualities in this way, only decided to cooperate because of my background.

“Of course, I’m sure it’s not just one or two people.”

He simply admitted it and stood up.

“The more competent you are, the more enemies you make in politics. The stakes are high, and your political life is at risk. Your wickedness and ambition may be overpowered by a more powerful force.”

“I won’t be crushed by a higher power.”

“I know you won’t. If you find yourself in a situation where you’re

about to be killed, you won't hesitate to take them with you. Such an existence will survive."

As a novice in politics, I can do nothing without Naoe-sensei's backing.

As I left the office with Tsukishiro, a young man in a white coat came up to me.

"He's the one you're looking for. I told him to come at this time."

"You've been planning this all along?"

"Of course, I had no intention of letting you meet him if you had not passed my interview."

After saying that, Tsukishiro bowed and left the office.

Time for another interview was added to my schedule.

On his resume, he wrote a rather unusual name: Suzukake Tanji.

"Hello."

“Have a seat.”

Tsukishiro, despite being someone introduced by Naoe-sensei, is someone I can’t be too careful of.

The hirer must be questioned in detail and checked for any problems.

The entering man named Suzukake Tanji looked like a sloppy middle-aged man with his stubble beard, but he was two years younger than me. He graduated from the University of Tokyo at the top of his class and came to the U.S., but he has never made any significant achievements.

He was a man who had no title but only his head on his shoulders, so to speak, but I still don’t know why Tsukishiro recommended such a man to me.

“Your resume seems to be very blank, what did you do abroad?”

“I was doing what I wanted to do.”

“…What did you want to do?”

“Well, a lot of things.”

“That’s not very clear. I’m not sure I understand.”

“Observe people.”*[8]*

It’s good to see so many people today who can’t even use proper honorifics.

You’ve learned that it’s somewhat better to be spoken to casually than with half-assed honorifics.

“Now tell me why you decided to take this interview.”

“I heard it pays well. I need money to stay abroad.”

“The cost of living is much higher than in Japan, that’s understandable.”

If you have the ability, you should stay and work there, but judging from this man’s attitude, I don’t need to question him about the difficulty of doing so.

“I have a question for you too…”

“What is it?”

“Before that, you need to stop using those disgusting honorifics. You can look at me like I’m an insect all you want, but if you really want the job, I need to know who you really are.”

“…I see. That’s fine, but won’t that just mean I’ll have to leave?”

I don’t have to be in human skin if that’s what he wants.

He shifted to an upright posture a little and crossed his legs.

“You’re not hired at the moment, Suzukake. You deserve credit for your brains, having graduated at the top of your class from all the prestigious schools you attended, but you haven’t left anything behind after that.”

“It’s just that the stage wasn’t prepared for me to leave anything behind.”

He replied, then quickly continued.

“I’m not seeking fame or a title, but I do want to understand the human mechanism. I thought that the Human Resource Development Project’s policy would be the perfect opportunity for me to answer my questions.”

“You don’t want a title, huh? If you meet our expectations, you’ll be rewarded in ways you haven’t been able to achieve in the public eye. And if the White Room project is successful, you can ask for the honor.”

I handed him the materials on the White Room, and Suzukake immediately began to look through them.

I have to hang a lot of carrots for these guys in front of me and let them show me their talent without regret. That was what I assumed, but you never know with researchers.

His eyes lit up like a child’s, he checked the facilities and environment, and began to murmur his hopes and ideals.

7

Later that day, I visited the White Room in Saitama, which had undergone renovation, and was searching for images and worrying about the selection of further educators. Then Kamogawa came up to me.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Ayanokōji. The important thing is that the children are… Are the arrangements underway?”

“How could we start the project otherwise? The scheme is almost complete.”

“Oh, ooh, that’s just great… You don’t have to tell me what’s in it, of course. I don’t want to get caught yet.”

The method of acquiring children that cannot be expressed to Kamogawa.

That is, to obtain newborns illegally from black market brokers using the Oba clan.

However, this involves many risks. Therefore, we must eventually switch to a more legitimate way of collecting children.

We’re still in the planning stage, but in the near future, we’ll set up a website and announce that we’ll be a place to take care of children from parents who are unable to raise their unborn children due to unavoidable circumstances.

It would be ideal to cooperate with them even before the birth of the child. There are women who cannot rely on the government system and cannot afford the cost of childbirth. There are many cases where women give birth and die in secret. Of course, it’s theoretically possible, but at the same time, there’s a big risk involved. When you carry a child in your belly, you aren’t really a parent in the true sense of the word. You cannot give birth to a child, and even if you did, you would not be able to raise it. But in many cases, they become mothers the moment they meet their children.

And what if there’s a fatal accident? If they sue for the return of their child, it’ll be traced back to the White Room. That must be avoided.

If it gets out, it'll be more than just a blemish on Naoe-sensei's name.

It's imperative that we only accept children from those who have given birth elsewhere, who aren't responsible and who cannot be mothers.

On the homepage, it would be good to put up a myriad of beautiful and hypocritical words.

"Don't take a life," "We accept babies anonymously," "We provide counseling for the needy," "How the foster care system works," and so on. These are all slogans that guarantee a future for themselves and their children.

Whenever a mother visits the hospital, the first step would be to arrange a meeting. They won't be asked for their names or where they live, but would simply be asked to give reasons why they cannot raise their children freely. If the child is simply unacceptable, some will readily allow the child to be placed in foster care. If they're in need of money, let them keep some of it. When you have no choice but to give the child to the hospital, you must allow one week for the child to be released. After that, some parents may regret giving up their children.

In this way, unrecognized children are gathered and sent to the White Room.

We keep a connection with each mother in the form of a name, just in case we're asked to return the child two or three years later.

Of course, you can't return a child you put in foster care.

We have to avoid being publicized when we do something illegal.

These are the reasons why the treatment of children is extremely sensitive and difficult.

"The problem is rather beyond that. We need to also consider the medical care of the child brought to the White Room."

"Medical…?"

"Children are fragile. The slightest thing can make them sick. But since it's difficult to take them to the hospital, it's essential to have a doctor who can treat them in the White Room."

Not just anyone can be a doctor.

There are a few requirements: the doctor must have their medical license revoked. They must be flexible in their thinking. They must be as old as possible, but not too old. They must be able to re-acquire their medical license if the situation demands it. Also, they must be in need of money or be unwilling to work in a legitimate way in the outside world.

"That's… a pretty difficult set of requirements. It's not looking good…"

"No wonder you think so. However, if you search all over Japan, you'll find people with unexpected backgrounds. In my search, I came

across a former doctor who lives deep in the mountains of Tottori. He had a history of a traffic accident that killed two college students who were riding a moped together."

Accidents are not uncommon. While returning home after a hard day's work late at night, the doctor, overcome with sleepiness, started to make a right turn without knowing the distance between himself and a moped going straight ahead, and they collided. The police and ambulance were immediately dispatched, but he couldn't be saved. The doctor, who was unlucky enough to have hit a child of a well-known local landowner, ran away to a discrete location to escape from the public's attention.

"Ten years have passed since that incident. He was able to get his medical license again, but he spent his days drinking."

"Well, it's good that we found someone like that… But while it's good news that he's been found, isn't there cause for concern?"

"He used to be a flamboyant, spendthrift guy. That's what we're after."

At least one. Maybe one more.

We need a doctor who can take care of the children's health.

8

Three months later. The arrangements for the children was made and the operation was about to start.

The final stage, however, was to finalize the curriculum aspect with the educators.

The researchers who had agreed to live and work at the institute were about to gather in the laboratory for a discussion.

Ishida, Souya, Suzukake, and Tabuchi are all seated in white coats.

“From now on, you four will be in charge of educating the first-generation White Room students. This is the first time you’ve met in person, but you’ve had many discussions with each other in online meetings. I don’t think this will get in the way of us working together.”

“Wait a minute. We’ve had many discussions, but we’ve different directions and policies. How do you expect us to be aligned?”

Souya, the elder of the bunch, strongly expressed his intention.

Ishida and Suzukake weren’t even trying to be understood, and they looked confident that they weren’t not mistaken in their principles. This wasn’t surprising since the same thing happened in the regular online meetings.

They’re the kind of people with whom you could have endless discussions about the direction they want to go in, but they’ll never get along with each other.

“What would you do if I twisted your teaching philosophies and demanded obedience from you?”

“I can’t do that. In that case, I’ll leave the meeting.”

Ishida immediately replied.

“Me, too. I came here only to give you my ideal education. If I can’t do that, I’m not going to work.”

The same went for Suzukake. From the beginning, he hadn’t even considered giving up the corner of his mind to compromise.

“How dare you be so rude to Ayanokōji-san. I know that he is paying a reasonable amount of money for the preparation.”

It was indeed a rude attitude, and Kamogawa, who’s an amateur in the educational theory field and oblivious to their determination, probably couldn’t overlook it. However, I rebuked Kamogawa.

“I said something that may have confused you, but there’s no need to jump to conclusions.”

We have a total of 15 children ready and available for use right now.

I laid out 15 business card-sized sheets of paper with each baby’s name, gender, and date of birth on the back of their own paper.

I then shuffled the cards as if mixing them appropriately and put them on the table.

Ishida, Suzukake, Souya—you will each pick five cards at random from here and take them in your hand. These are the children you'll educate and be in charge of. Teach them for a certain period of time. The three White Room's first-generation student groups will be managed in parallel by Tabuchi. Tabuchi has agreed in advance to monitor all three of you equally.

Tabuchi nodded and took a glance at each of the three of them.

"I see. That's a good idea. Since we don't share the same values, it's the only choice we have."

The conclusion I came to was to let these three compete freely.

It would be an impossible task to ask these geniuses, who have different philosophies and beliefs, to align themselves from the beginning.

"But we can't expect them to stay that way forever. The teaching period is three years. When the children are all three years old, they're given a comprehensive test, and the one who leads the group with the best results is the official leader."

There is no cause for concern, as no one's expecting to lose.

Ishida nodded his head in satisfaction and reached for the paper, so I glared at him and grabbed his arm.

"What?

"What? If you say anything like your child is not of the right quality after losing, or if you complain about the decision and refuse to abide by it, you will lose the three years' worth of money you've inscribed in your bank book as a penalty. Besides, you'll completely lose your position not only in the public eye but also in the underworld. Don't ever forget that, okay?"

Ishida, in front of me, firmly and slowly cleared his throat in response to my words.

"Are you two good, too?"

"I have no objection."

Souya seemed to agree with my words, but he must've taken them to heart.

However, only Suzukake showed a grim face.

"If you have a complaint, say it now."

"I know. What's bothering me is the part about following the leader. I don't think I'm going to lose, but I need to know what they'll do if I follow them. Do you want me to follow a leader who has different principles? If so, I'm not going to take the job."

“We don’t need a genius if they simply comply with everything. And there would be no merit in uniting three eccentric people like you. I will give the leader the final say, but if there are any objections to the educational policy, we will have a thorough discussion. That’s what Tabuchi is for.”

“It’s like the ruling party and the opposition party.”

Kamogawa said, impressed, and in typical statesmanlike fashion.

“…I understand.”

Ishida had regained his composure while retaining the confident look in his eyes.

This is the best decision for now, even if it delays the plan.

Only the first group of students will be trained in three groups for three years, and then the leaders will be chosen and the groups will be unified.

It’s expensive and less efficient, but it’s a necessary measure to unify educators.

A new educational policy will be created and the training of a new group of students will start on an annual basis.

We’ll be forced to modify various plans along the way, but this is the best plan we can take now.

Chapter 3:

Launch

DREAMS. IT IS said that we dream almost every day, but whether we remember them or not is related to the depth of our sleep.

Considering the fact that the dream is vividly etched in my mind, I must not be a very shallow sleeper. The dream I'm now having occurred a long time ago, that's right, when I was still a teenager.

I was reminiscing about how I felt when I saved up money to buy a used *Kei car*. The mileage was well over 100,000 kilometers, and the interior was shabby—the maintenance not going as I wished. I couldn't say it was a comfortable car, even so, I drove that car around with the feeling that I had become the breadwinner of the family.

The time I spent with just myself and the car, without making any friends or lovers, was irreplaceable.

A considerable amount of time has passed since then. Now I'm no longer driving myself. I'm currently asleep in the back seat. The deep, soft comfort of genuine leather. The warm feeling enclosing my back. All of which have changed to something far more luxurious than the car I used to drive.

But why is it that I'm far from reaching the excitement and joy I felt in those days?

"Ayanokōji-sensei, we're about to arrive."

Hearing this voice from the driver's seat, I quietly opened my eyes.

Completely contrasting the city scenery, we were about to enter a rough road surrounded by mountains.

"It's going to be a little bumpy from here."

"I know."

It's already been three years since Naoe-sensei entrusted me with the Human Resource Development Project.

At first, I wondered what was going to happen, but the project, officially named the White Room Project, got off to a good start amid secrecy. *(TL Note: Kei Car : Japanese Classification for cars that are considered as “light automobiles”.)*

The number of people from the business world who wanted to invest in the project increased day by day, and we succeeded in creating a surplus fund. Of course, all the money raised is ostensibly for the White Room.

The knowledge of the White Room has turned into a kind of status applied only to those in the know.

A big investment story.

There weren't many situations in the past that have generated so much anticipation despite not having yet produced results.

Just like certain stocks, by the time the public realizes its profitability, it's already too late.

Only those who've invested a large amount of money in the company from the time it was still undiscovered are allowed to succeed.

Even if I don't reveal Naoe-sensei's name, the businessmen can automatically anticipate what my next move is going to be.

Such a stream of events was all on my side.

The government is already succeeding in doing so, and the presence of high education will not be a small factor.

The government will eventually get involved in the White Room, even if they publicize it.

Those who've invested ahead of the curve can expect huge publicity and return on their investment.

Even if things have gone well up to this point, if the situation turns out to be disappointing, the investors will turn their backs without hesitation, and those who call them "sensei-sensei" will simultaneously hurl abuse at them all.

For this reason, achieving clear and constant results is important.

We cannot let our guard down at all.

While I was on the move, I received another call on my cell phone from a new businessman who wanted to invest in the project. Despite that the true value of the 1st generation children has not yet been announced, once the acceptance period for the 2nd generation started, applicants began to appear one after another…

This is despite the fact that we haven't even told them how the first batch of students is developing.

Of course, this was a strategic move—to instill that the White Room's education was going well, that it was more successful than I had imagined, and that there were so many applicants that they may not all be accepted. By secretly distributing such information about

the White Room, I was increasing the value of its existence. In addition, there were people who wanted to use the White Room in a different way from what it was intended for. That is the existence of illegitimate children, an inseparable problem from wealthy people.

When a mistress insists on having a baby, she has the baby placed in the White Room as a condition for having the baby. In this way, the existence of the child can be ostensibly completely erased.

A mistress has a record of having given birth to a child and can keep a connection with her partner.

Of course, this may sound outrageous and incomprehensible to many ordinary people.

Since it would lead to the securing of human resources and funds for the White Room, there was no reason for us to refuse. We accepted the offer with a resounding ‘yes’ and immediately added the offer to our list.

“They never learn, do they?”

Does having money make people crazy? They easily repeat unwanted pregnancies in a selfish act.

I don’t mind if they use them to have babies in secret, but their lower bodies’ looseness is disgusting.

Now, more than 30% of the second generation consists of illegitimate children that cannot be revealed to the public.

In other words, the value of the White Room is still at that low level. Achievement isn’t enough for the public to entrust their beloved children to the White Room.

The business people who offer money and children do not know much about the real plan, and of course, many of the staff members don’t know the true meaning of the experiment.

They won’t doubt that the purpose of the experiment is to educate children born under the unfortunate stars and return them to society after they’ve been raised in a respectable manner.

“That’s understandable.”

I, myself, am still far more inclined to see children as experimental subjects.

It’s a big risk to take the wealthy’s precious children now.

How to fill this discrepancy is also an issue that we cannot avoid in the future.

Regardless of the situation, we’ll provide thorough education to all children.

The White Room will eventually become a government-approved facility, that isn’t a pipe dream.

Eventually, educational facilities all over the world will be modeled after the White Room.

Naoe-sensei and I will take the lead in building that bridge, and we'll have a stronger voice in the party.

When the old Naoe-sensei retires, I'll have a huge post waiting for me.

Little by little, I'm steadily moving forward, one step at a time.

This realization is beginning to sprout.

Working on the Human Resource Development Project as hard as I could from the day Naoe-sensei entrusted it to me wasn't a mistake. This project is an essential part of my life.

There's no doubt that bright hopes lay in the distance.

Though, it's not without its uncertainties.

While I was working on the White Room Project, I was inevitably going to have to keep my distance from the political world. They have a very keen sense of smell. Some of them must've already figured out that I was working on such a project behind the scenes. There are many allies, but there are also many enemies, and many of them are trying to extract weakness from me since I'm Naoe-sensei's right-hand man.

They keep their distance from me to find out whether I am on their side or against them.

The White Room is now half of me.

But that's why I made sure to keep my connections with the business world strong.

It's the same in any world to have an insurance policy in case of emergencies.

If you can't expand your connections in the political world, you should strengthen your position in the business world.

This is essential because the political world and the business world are two sides of the same coin.

The connections with the business world are becoming stronger by the day, and I've chosen to both don the mask of a politician and the mask of a wealthy man.

Money flows from right to left, left to right, and I use the money I've collected to consolidate myself.

"It seems that Sakayanagi-sama has just arrived in the White Room."

"I see. I don't mind the suddenness, just hurry up a bit."

"Yes, sir."

Even though there's still time until the scheduled meeting, he's still a guest, and it's not a good idea to keep him waiting.

1

I walked through the gate, let my car park at the front entrance and walked quickly to the guest room.

Sakayanagi, who had not sat down on the sofa but was standing and staring out the window, turned to me.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,”

“No problem, Ayanokōji-sensei, I arrived earlier than expected.”

Sakayanagi, bowing politely, approached me, smiling as usual.

“I was looking forward to the unveiling of the White Room today.”

“I see.”

For the past three years or so, I’ve been in frequent contact with Sakayanagi.

I thought I wouldn’t get along with him, who was born into a privileged environment, but even so, you never know how people behave when they share some common goals.

Perhaps it was because I had been dealing with people who were always trying to find out what was in each other’s hearts, but it was no longer painful to meet with Sakayanagi, who didn’t have a hidden face.

“I’m still surprised with the security; it doesn’t suit the place.”

“I guess it can’t be helped. We can’t make this place public now. There are a lot of people out there who are desperately searching for scandals about me and Naoe-sensei.”

Perhaps troubled by this response, Sakayanagi only smiled wryly.

“You helped me the most with the White Room project. I wanted to show you first.”

“I just want to support this project since it’ll save more children.”

I have no doubt that to Sakayanagi, the children in front of him are the ones who will lead Japan.

For me and Naoe-sensei, it's nothing more than a card for career advancement, but we've already taken that into consideration.

Whatever his intentions are, this man will accept it as long as there are children to be saved.

He's a good man, but you never know when he might turn against you.

This man will distance himself from me when he realizes that these children's futures are not promised.

"I'll show you around."

"Please."

I took Sakayanagi to the lab first.

“Today’s an important day for setting new policies for the White Room, and I would like you to watch the children grow up.”

“The children you’ve taken in are already over three years old, aren’t they? It’s early.”

Some of the children were seen by Sakayanagi’s collaborator.

There must be a few scenes that he recalls.

“Don’t you have children?”

When I met Sakayanagi, this man had already been with his wife for several years.

Even now, I haven’t heard that she’s pregnant or has given birth to a child.

“It’s not that I don’t want to have children, it’s just that I haven’t had the chance to do so. We’ve talked about letting nature take its course.”

In other words, if either the husband, wife, or both of them have a problem, they won’t mention their prospects of having a child.

If both parties agree, it wouldn’t be a bad choice either.

“I see. That was unnecessary, forget it.”

“I’ve always wondered too, Ayanokōji-sensei, are you ever going to get married?”

“I would consider it if I had a partner, but unfortunately I’ve been single for a while now.”

“A partner is essential for a long career in politics. I hope you find such a person soon.”

“Yes, I do too.”

Love, marriage, childbirth—I don’t have time for that.

They say that having someone to protect you makes you stronger, but unfortunately, I don’t think so.

To have someone to protect you is to be weak at the same time.

I have seen too many politicians who've died for the sake of their protectors in the past.

2

It was a bit noisy when I arrived at the laboratory.

Suzukake's and the three others' students are about to take a comprehensive test.

"Thanks for waiting. Let's get started."

"Yes, sir."

Tabuchi, the only neutral one in the room, moderated the session without any personal feelings.

"We divided them into three groups in an isolated manner and had them undergo thorough education for three years."

"Among the three researchers, the one who shows the most results will be chosen as the representative, right?"

Having given a brief explanation, Sakayanagi understood the situation.

"Yes."

"Do you already have a prediction of the outcome?"

"No. For the past three years, I've had almost nothing to do with it. I've only provided the necessary support without any layman's interference. I don't even know who's actually going to showcase what they've accomplished."

For the past three years, I've let everything move forward without even viewing the project's process.

I can't say that I wouldn't have interfered if I had known about it along the way.

When I answered honestly, Sakayanagi applauded in surprise.

"It must've taken a lot of courage to leave it completely to the field, didn't it? Most supervisors cannot trust their subordinates to do their work, and they tend to talk over them."

Those who spend money tend to have such evil thoughts.

“After all, I’m working with other people’s money. If it had been money made from my blood and sweat, I might’ve been more critical of it. The only ones who should suffer if the money goes down the drain are the investors.”

That’s why I was able to sit tight and wait for three years.

“But still. If we fail, you’re likely to lose everything. It’s the same for ordinary business owners. They get a big loan from the bank and fight for the company’s fortune. It’s the bank’s money, but it can also be said that it is the president’s personal money.”

In the sense that they’re responsible for the company, they aren’t so different from a supervisor.

“You’ve never changed your habit of being quick to praise others, have you?”

“It’s my nature. There’s always good in others, and it’s my job to see it.”

I answered without hesitation that what he said was a true compliment.

This is what makes this man easy to control, what I like about him, and what I don’t like about him.

Children came into the room through the magic mirror glass.

The children, each with a nameplate stating their respective researcher, took their seats quietly.

“At three years old, they’re just about ready for a little conversation, right?”

It’s understandable that this doesn’t ring true for Sakayanagi, who doesn’t have any children of his own.

“They begin to show signs of comprehension, intelligence, ego, and even some manual dexterity. The most obvious development, at first sight, may be the motor aspect—In general, it would display in standing on one leg, walking on tiptoe, and smoothly climbing stairs.”

“I think it’s great enough to be able to do that…”

With a tense look on his face, Sakayanagi looked at the children.

“Begin!”

At his command, the children turned over their papers and picked up their pens in unison.

“This… is a test?”

No one gets up from their seats, and they’re more focused and engaged than the elementary school kids running around the neighborhood.

“What are the kids testing on?”

“It’s an arithmetic test. Here it is.”

I received the paper Tabuchi brought, and Sakayanagi and I took a look at it for the first time.

The problems range from addition and subtraction to multiplication and division.

“These are the kind of problems that elementary school students should be working on, right? Amazing…”

While Sakayanagi was impressed, Tabuchi calmly replied.

“The world is a big place. There are children considered gifted who can solve more difficult problems. They’re undoubtedly genetic prodigies.”

“But the children here are not gifted…”

“Indeed, they are. They aren’t special. All of the children, who show no bias in ability, have acquired the ability to problem solve.”

The children’s confusion over difficult problems isn’t unlike that of the students taking the entrance exams.

The first discomfort I felt while watching the three groups was that Ishida's and Souya's groups were so similar in their attitudes and reactions to the exam that I couldn't tell the difference by mixing them up, while Suzukake's group didn't move an inch.

The real-time camera tracking showed that the children's answers were not rushed, upset or distraught at all, even though some of their answers were wrong.

Regardless of whether this fact is good or bad, Ishida and the others were clearly upset.

"What kind of education created such inhuman children…?"

Souya's mutterings were those of a researcher.

"My first task was to make my children develop a mature mind. I made sure that even if they couldn't solve a problem, they could continue calmly, objectively, and without panic. I've punished children who could not do so without mercy."

Far from having the reaction of a child, they were like emotionless robots.

"Corporal punishment for 3-year-olds?"

"No, it's from when they were newborns. And I don't want you to call it corporal punishment, Souya. This is my schooling."

Hearing those words, Sakayanagi appeared more uncomfortable than anyone else.

Suzukake's overall percentage of correct answers was clearly higher than both Ishida and Souya's children, although it would be a big problem if it were not accompanied by results.

"The concentration of those children is close to that of adults. They're so absorbed in their work that if you were to call out to them nearby, they might not notice you right away."

After he had a good grasp of the academic abilities of almost all the participants, Suzukake played music in the room. The loud, out-of-place sound made the children in the room stop and start looking around.

The children Suzukake was teaching, however, did not overreact to

the sound, as he boasted, and continued to focus only on solving the problems.

“How is this possible?”

Ishida was also surprised by Suzukake’s education.

“Education. Children are afraid of being punished in various ways. Physical pain, mental pain, whatever you deem effective. Push them to the edge of their terror, and the fears will eventually go away. Not in the metaphorical sense, but in the real sense. We’re still in the process of doing that.”

“With all due respect, that is unquestionably corporal punishment. There’s no meaning to the abilities you gain by doing this. I don’t think your educational policy is the right one.”

It's certainly not possible to say that there are no problems at all. No wonder Sakayanagi is angry.

"I have no right to interfere, but you must not approve of Suzukake-san's way of doing things."

"I'm sorry, Sakayanagi, but I don't want an outsider's opinion. Keep your mouth shut."

"But- even with Ishida-san's and Souya-san's education, you've achieved a great deal."

It seems that Ishida's and Souya's groups were growing more naturally as human beings.

But will they grow up to be geniuses in the true sense of the word?

Even if they grew up and become excellent human beings to some extent, it's doubtful whether they could compete with naturally gifted students and become geniuses in certain fields.

On the other hand, Suzukake's education seems to have both high risks and big returns.

"I only care about results. I don't care about the process."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. I decided to work for you because I thought you would let me be free in the true sense of the word. You said you only care about results."

Unlike Sakayanagi, who expressed his distaste, Ishida and Souya were very smart.

They didn't say that they had no feelings for the children, but their faces as researchers were more substantial than their feelings for them.

They were gazing at the children Suzukake had created with a twinkle in their eyes.

After the academic testing, the next step was to check their motor development.

"The three of them have very different educational philosophies, so I told them to express the abilities they've acquired in their own unique way unlike in the study aspect, where I've standardized the

testing methods.”

The children Ishida educated were dexterously using their small hands to perform crafts.

Souya’s students showed movement with the bars and jungle gym.

But it was Suzukake’s educated children who were the most astonishing in the physical aspect as well.

It wasn’t only their dexterity and physical agility. They were also able to develop a wide variety of skills, including playing the piano.

“This is a 3-year-old playing… unbelievable.”

Of course, it was obvious to anyone's ears that their skills were far from professional.

But even an adult with little practice couldn't play this well.

In the end, the important thing isn't whether you can play the piano or not.

"How many things have you taught them in just three years, Suzukake-san…?"

"My education method is far above the average person's ability to learn. If you don't have the talent to learn in a short time, you'll be punished endlessly. The brain naturally doesn't like it and forces the child to mature early. People with brains as small as theirs have unlimited potential."

That's the difference within three years of this education. Not to mention when it comes to 5 years, 10 years, 15 years, and 20 years.

I wonder how much of a lead we'll have. I myself got goosebumps when I saw these results. Overall, the group educated by Suzukake was by far the best.

Ishida and Souya were staring at Suzukake's data, forgetting to hide their frustrated faces.

"You did well. You've shown what you can do."

"Thanks. However, I don't think there was a big difference in ability between the two of them and me. I'm rather impressed with how well you've done with a straightforward education."

"You praise people too, Suzukake."

"Facts are facts. And as you can see, there's one thing that my children inevitably lack."

"Emotions, right?"

"Yes. Ishida-san and Souya-san have nurtured their children with human emotions. That's normal. But I eliminated them thoroughly. I thought that by not allowing the ability to communicate through dialogue to flourish, I could raise the level of human potential."

Everything that was competed against was only in regards to the

brains and body.

For Suzukake, victory was already in sight from the very beginning.

“If you put me as the leader, frankly speaking, there’s a danger that the first generation will become incomparable with no personality. But I believe we can create the strongest people.”

After three years of actual research, Suzukake was clearly convinced of this point.

“Ishida and Souya, what do you think about emotions?”

“There’s no denying that the inhumanity factor will increase, but… as a researcher, I felt that I would like to see the strongest human being developed by your hands, Suzukake-*shi’s*[9].”

Souya nodded in agreement.

With Suzukake as the leader, we'll start working on the curriculum for the second generation.

"You'll be in charge of the curriculum for the second generation and what kind of training policy we'll adopt."

"Thank you."

Suzukake bowed deeply and shook hands with Ishida and the others.

"I'm…"

Sakayanagi turned away to leave.

"I know you don't like it. But this is also a form of education."

Sakayanagi left the room without looking back.

From now on, perhaps quite a few children will be sacrificed to the research, but that's okay. It's a small price to pay when the end result is a perfect human being. The goal is to train 100 people and make 100 people perfect.

That is the ultimate goal of the White Room. Now is the time to see how far we can go.

In this sense, it's encouraging to have someone like Suzukake who's capable of fearless research. And with the support of people possessing some common sense like Ishida and others, it's also possible to prevent runaways.

It seems that we're past the stage where we need to talk about anything else.

It's now my job to keep this from becoming public as much as possible. I must continue to provide them with a place for them to research without hesitation.

3

After an hour or so later, I sat down with Sakayanagi.

How did today's results look to someone outside of the White Room?

It goes without saying that this was a unique opportunity to find out.

"Let me once again ask you your thoughts. Of course, you don't have to hold back."

"Is that so? I've been thinking about it all day long as I've watched those children grow up."

The *raison d'etre* of the White Room—the usefulness of the White Room.

I wonder if Sakayanagi was able to feel this firsthand.

"The children I saw today were far from the ordinary 3-year-olds I know, not to mention the children educated by Suzukake-san, and even the children educated by Ishida-san and Souya-san are probably better than 90% of the children in this world."

Sakayanagi's signature, praise-first analysis, remains unchanged.

"It's not easy to bring a child to this level, even if the child's a wealthy family's gifted progeny," he says.

"But with the way you speak, you don't think they can compete with the remaining 10%?"

"Isn't that what you, Ayanokōji-sensei, yourself have experienced firsthand?"

"…"

It's been almost proven that these children who've only grown up to the age of three have more developed intelligence and physical abilities than the average child.

Some results have been achieved.

However, the world is still skeptical, and I had a feeling that this success wouldn't be enough to dispel it.

If you were to ask me if they were as good as or better than the "gifted" 3-year-old children, I would say they're in the gray.

Waiting for the first generation children to reach the age of four or five years old shouldn't be decisive.

"But I thought this was good enough for me. If we can give children who are at risk of not getting the education they're looking for—if we can give them this thorough education—we can give them enough skills to be able to enter the world."

Sakayanagi, who had no idea what the White Room was really like, summed it up.

“That’s why I was a little worried about Suzukake-san as a leader. For children… No, emotions are essential for all humans. We cannot exist if we lose any of them. If you can correct me on that, I won’t hesitate to continue my support and assistance.”

“I see. I knew you’d say that. But do you really think that’ll convince the current investors and those in the business world whom you’ve yet to meet? Not everyone thinks only of the children like you do. There are big interests involved in the White Room.”

“You’re saying we need more rigorous education?”

“Yes, indeed. Anyone with a certain amount of money can produce brilliant students. Just put a lecturer who graduated from a top university by your side and bring in a coach who’s produced Olympic athletes. If you continue to educate gifted children from an early age, you can usually improve their skills to some extent. There’s no point in having a White Room that only produces the same level of results. It’s worthless.”

Who would invest tens or hundreds of millions in such a White Room?

“What is needed is outstanding ability. The brains to go beyond Japan’s top universities and win top positions at the world’s most prestigious universities, and the physical abilities to surpass those of Olympic athletes. We’ll create a person who has the physical and mental fortitude to take on the world’s leaders. That’s the kind of power we need in the White Room.”

“Isn’t that sort of charity a bit excessive? Not all children who have no parents or who were abandoned by their parents are looking for such power. It’s enough to give them the ability to live and adapt to society.”

“I understand what you want to say. Your opinion is already enough as a reference.”

“…Ayanokōji-sensei, is what you told me true?”

“Of course. I’m working to help underprivileged children. You know my ambitions lie there, but nothing more, nothing less.”

Sakayanagi, who had been looking at me doubtfully, bowed his head apologetically.

“Then I have nothing more to say to you. I urge you to give your students a loving education that puts them first. If you do so, the day when the people will recognize the White Room will come.”

With those words, Sakayanagi left the office, though seemingly unconvinced.

“Sakayanagi you’re naive, that’s no good.”

The world is not so sweet that it’ll only accept such idealism.

What's required is not a reasonable result, but the best result. But what we have still isn't enough. We need one more push. There's no guarantee that the current results alone will keep the investors nodding their heads forever. We need something that will give them a strong push…

We need a decisive factor.

But imposing a more rigorous education on our students now won't produce immediate results.

Three years… No, it'll take five years… at least that long.

We need to create persuasive power.

What should we do…

How can we get the business world to invest more money in a short period of time?

Think, think…

This White Room may change the world.

I want my words to carry weight.

Weight…

"I see."

I'm reminded of what Naoe-sensei said. Without some self-sacrifice, there's no real success.

No matter how enthusiastically I talk about education's success or failure, my words will never carry any real weight. The business world doesn't trust the White Room either.

Why is that?

Naturally, the White Room is about educating others. I don't put myself at risk. This is nothing more than an extension of my leisure time.

I need to be able to show that I can fearlessly trust the White Room with my precious child.

There's only one thing I have to do to achieve that. I picked up my cell phone and gave someone a call.

"Hello?"

The caller, who was probably still sleeping, answered the phone in a drowsy voice.

"I have a favor to ask you."

4

A red light shone in the darkness, followed immediately by a plume of smoke.

I saw a silhouette emerge from the sunset and sat up.

“I’m sorry. Did I wake you up?”

“Don’t worry, it’s time to go back.”

The plan was to leave at 11 p.m., but the date had changed.

“Busy day for a politician, isn’t it? I can’t believe they’re working you this late.”

“It’s easier to move around at night than in the daytime.”

Mika’s brand of cigarettes changes every time I see her.

This was Mika’s usual way to show that she was in love with each new man she slept with.

“How long are you going to keep doing this job?”

“Well, it can’t go on forever… I’ve aged a lot since I met Atsuomi.”

Women are all about freshness. As time goes by, year by year, they lose their freshness and become rotten. The world tends not to recognize this, and in fact, hates to acknowledge it, but only those who understand this will succeed.

They not only use their youth as a weapon, but they also have another weapon at hand.

“My advice to you—it’s time to get out of the game.”

“I’m a little surprised to hear that from you, Atsuomi.”

After a funny grin, Mika got up from her bed, still in all her clothes.

“Well, I thought it was time for me to move on too. But I don’t have a vision for the future. I don’t envision myself marrying someone and having a happy family. I don’t see myself having kids, making mom friends, or sending my children to elementary school… I can’t help but

laugh at myself.”

“You’ll do fine.”

“I don’t know. I’m rarely liked by people of my own gender. I might have a harder time than you think. But… I think I’ll take the plunge. You’ve made me a lot of money, and you allowed me to dream.”

Mika’s wealth should be enough for a decent life.

But this woman got her money at a young age.

She must be more than a little scared to lower her standard of living.

“Lastly, I want to entrust you with a big job.”

“…What?”

I took out a marriage certificate and put it on the table.

“Huh? What’s this?”

“I want you to marry me.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Of course I’m not kidding.”

“Atsuomi…”

Mika approached, with her eyes slightly teary… she gave a small laugh.

“What do you want? You’re not the kind of guy who would choose me, are you?”

“Don’t you see me as a man who wants a pure marriage with the woman he loves?”

“Not at all.”

“That’s right. It’s a very different kind of marriage than the one you want, a one-size-fits-all kind of marriage.”

I have a future to achieve. And I need someone like her to make it happen.

“What do you mean?”

“I have a new puzzle. And I’m going to need your help to solve it.”

“Explain it to me in a way I can understand.”

“A child. A child of my own flesh and blood. It will be an important move in my rise to power.”

Mika was taken aback, but soon realized what I meant.

“You mean… You want me to have a baby?”

“Yes. Of course, I’ll pay you enough money to make it worth your while.”

“Wait a minute. Why me? There are plenty of women willing to have a baby if you’re willing to pay for it.”

“That’s true if it’s just about the money, but you’re convenient in so many ways. You have some contacts in the business world and you’re

a good liar. The important aspect is the ability to fool people. If people find out that an unknown woman gave birth to my child, it won't matter. You also need to play the good wife."

"I get it… But for how long? How long are you going to make me play the role of a good wife for?"

"Don't worry. I'll announce the pregnancy and hold the ceremony when the time is right. I'll let you go as soon as we have the baby."

She understood, but she still couldn't quite wrap her head around the situation.

"There's one more reason why I chose you. Your origins are clearly inferior to society's values in general. Your mother's an uneducated woman in the *mizu-shoubai*[10]. So is your sister. It's a family that's been repeatedly married and divorced and lives a life of no value."

“Wow, isn’t that a little rude…? It’s true, though.”

A superior child from a superior mother is just a diamond in the rough.

“It’s my job to polish a plain stone on the side of the road so that it shines like a gemstone. I’ll refine it so that a mere stone will be valued more than a diamond.”

“So that’s why…”

“As I said before, it’s never a good idea to fool everyone around you. It’s easy to get an incompetent woman to be a surrogate, but it’s hard to hide the whiff of artifice. You can’t fool the business people; those who have a keen sense of smell.”

You have to go through the proper channels to get your precious child on the show.

In this respect, Mika would be a natural choice for many people who’re aware of my connection with the project.

“You can choose any method you want. Ideally, you should be able to have a baby within a year to a year and a half.”

By placing my child in the White Room, I’m further demonstrating the existence of the White Room.

This is truly a revolutionary plan.

Chapter 4:

An Unprecedented Experimental Facility

MIKA LET OUT a sigh of admiration as she looked at the wads of cash laid out on the white table.

“There’s 50 million. I made them get it in cash, just like you wanted. It won’t be traced back to you.”

I told Mika without making eye contact.

The amount excludes all expenses incurred during the pregnancy, such as delivery and hospitalization.

“Politicians really have an abundance of money and everything at their disposal, don’t they? Was it easy for you to get 50 million?”

Mika said sarcastically, dressed in a suit she was probably not used to wearing.

“Money is important, but I have plenty of it to live on. That’s the world on our side.”

Mika laughed at me as I spoke in a matter-of-fact manner.

“The fact that your child’s born doesn’t affect your heart in the slightest, does it?”

“Are you going to tell me that you’ve awakened to motherhood now?”

“No way. If I had, I wouldn’t have given the child away. To me, the whole process of conceiving and giving birth to that child is work. Nothing more, nothing less.”

I was relieved to hear that.

I could see in her eyes that she was speaking the truth; it wasn’t Mika’s superiority talking.

“I guess I was right in choosing you after all.”

“Well, I don’t know if the job’s worth it. I almost regretted it when my belly started to grow and the morning sickness got worse. I came here to complain or something, but when I saw all this money in front of me, I didn’t care anymore.”

Even for Mika, who’d been receiving a monthly salary of well over a million yen, a lump sum of 50 million is a different story. I don’t want to hear her complaints. When it comes to surrogacy, etc., I paid more than twice the market rate, even if it’s estimated at a high level.

“Normally, we’d have to pay almost half of this to the government.”

“That’s right… You have to earn about 100 million to save 50 million, right? I can’t help but think you’re crazy if you have to pay almost half of it in taxes.”

Touching the surface of the wad of cash, Mika laughed a little.

“Have you ever paid taxes properly?”

It's said that many people in professions similar to Mika's don't pay taxes.

"Come to think of it, I can hardly remember. Well, maybe I'll pay them when I start a new job, who knows? Anyway, how are you these days, Atsuomi? Any change?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm busy and don't want to talk too long. Let's just get on with what we have to do."

I took out the contract and held it out in front of Mika.

"If you're going to take the money, write it down. You have the rights to the child until you sign here."

"You fret too much. Don't worry, I only had a baby for the money. I have no regrets."

Mika had no intention from the beginning to refuse the money offered to her, and once again expressed her willingness to accept it.

"No matter what happens, I'll never be allowed to identify myself as the mother in my life."

This may have sounded insistent, but it was very important.

If Mika, who's familiar with the underworld, tries to get the child back, the possibility that the White Room's existence will be exposed cannot be denied.

"I know. Don't talk about me to him either."

"I won't. I don't have to."

"Can you just tell me what's going to happen to him?"

I haven't told Mika anything about the White Room.

It was understandable that she was concerned about what will happen to him.

"That's none of your business. Once the deal is completed, we're done."

"Yes, yes."

Mika signed the contract as if she understood that there was nothing more to be done.

“Is this okay?”

Judging by the handwriting’s pressure, there was no hesitation at all.

I guess she wasn’t at all worried if she was so sure.

Mika gave instructions to take the attaché case containing the money into Mika’s car trunk.

It was a bit risky to carry such a large amount of money in cash, but Mika and I agreed to avoid transferring the money through a bank.

“Well, I’ll be on my way.”

This was the last time I saw Mika and the last time we spoke to each other.

As I was about to leave without saying a word, Mika took a few steps before stopping.

“…Don’t you want to ask me what I’m going to do now?”

I couldn’t read her expression.

However, I could make out that there was a hint of emotion in her voice.

“I’m not interested. You’re free to go to that host or fly abroad with the money.”

She was slightly surprised but then smiled as if she understood.

“You knew? You knew about me and him?”

“Even if I don’t investigate, people around me will investigate on their own.”

“How long have you known?”

“Before I asked you to marry me and have a baby.”

“Aren’t you suspicious if he really is your child?”

Mika narrowed her eyes as if she was playing a trick.

“It’s not even worth getting suspicious about. You could’ve predicted that I would do a postnatal exam, and if by any chance you were carrying someone else’s child, you’d lose your reward. It’s an impossible choice.”

“Hmm, yes, indeed.”

“But you did a good job of restraining yourself. I must commend you for keeping your secret meetings with him to a minimum during

our married life, and for being so careful that the host would never find out."

I don't know if the host really wants to make Mika happy, though.

At the very least, Mika's fortune, including the 50 million, should be over 200 million.

Five or ten years—until the money runs out, she is guaranteed a happy life with her host.

"Atsuomi… Did you ever think you'd like me?"

"You'll do anything for yourself and money. That's the biggest thing I appreciate about you."

"I think you're missing the point… No, I'm sure that's the whole answer."

I've never had any special feelings for Mika.

And at the same time, this woman has no feelings for me either.

All these sympathetic words were an act to make herself look good.

She likes young, good-looking, well-spoken men who value themselves and their money above all else.

That is Mika.

"Goodbye, Atsuomi."

"Wait. This is my present to you."

Three million on top of the fee I'd originally prepared.

I gave the consolation money, a "parting gift," over to Mika.

"You don't have to go that far, I'm not going to sell this to a weekly magazine. I've done a lot of black-hearted things with you, too."

Mika has a lot of things that she doesn't want exposed.

"Of course. That's why this is a pure, open, and honest gift. You don't have to take it if you don't want it."

I reached over and pulled the money back, but Mika stopped me

with a laugh.

“There’s no reason not to have the money to build your own home,” she said. “I heard that land is getting more and more expensive these days.”

“You don’t know the underlying reasons why land prices are going up, do you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. I’m just interested in the money.”

“That’s just like you. You know, it’s gonna be a while before you can officially marry someone.”

“That’s because I’m supposed to be your wife back in this country.”

Until we’ve put the child in the White Room for a while, it’s necessary for us to be publicly established as husband and wife.

“Not for long. If you can wait two more years, then you can do whatever you want.”

For this purpose, I’ve already given her the divorce papers filled out, only excluding the dates for me and Mika respectively.

“One last thing, if you have a name picked out, I’ll file it under that name.”

Eleven days have already passed since the birth of the child, and unless additional steps are taken, there are only three days left.

“I don’t even have rights to the child, but you’re letting me decide?”

“A name is just a symbol. No matter who names the child, what’s inside of a human being is the same.”

After a short pause, Mika spoke the child’s name.

“Then Kiyotaka.”

“A very good suggestion, that’s just like you.”

I was a little surprised at this unexpected turn of events.

“I just thought that this would be the name you’d remember,” she said.

“That’s fine. I’ll accept it.”

“You really are a very calm and level-headed person, aren’t you? It’d be normal for people to lose their temper in this situation. Naming a host that I’m crazy about… That’s insane.”

Mika started to walk away. This time she didn’t stop.

“Goodbye Atsuomi, my time with you has been a valuable experience for me. For better or worse.”

After Mika left, I wrote “Kiyotaka” on the list.

With that much money in her pocket, she shouldn’t have a single complaint.

I gave up my child as a representative of the White Room.

If I can make a track record, I can say that the money was a small price to pay.

As long as Kiyotaka is useful for at least 5 years, it doesn't matter if he breaks down after that.

There's no need for one's own child to be excellent.

"She was quite a nice lady, Ayanokōji-san."

Tsukishiro, who was waiting in the next room, appeared with a smile as usual.

"You've had a hard time, too, haven't you? I made you play detective."

"I'm a jack-of-all-trades, you know. But are you sure you can trust her? You might consider getting rid of her if you have to. She may stay quiet while she has money, but from the looks of her, she'll run out of it in a few years. Or, could he run away with the large sum of money?"

Yes, you never know with people.

In the future, when she loses the money, Mika may appear in front of me again.

But I hope she's smart enough not to do so.

No matter how dirty and worthless your soul is, it's not pleasant to die for nothing.

"It's always a good idea to make the first move, but it depends. Mika's disappearance creates other risks. We need her to be a mother for now."

It's clear that I'm not attached to the child due to the circumstances. If this is revealed by the person who was my wife, my credibility in the business world will be lost all at once.

"You're right. It's as you say."

"In a few days, the child will be in my hands after the tests are completed and he'll begin the experiments as a fourth-generation student."

"It seems like your son will have a tough life ahead of him, just like you."

Those words sound like pity, but Tsukishiro has no such feelings.

1

On the day Kiyotaka arrived, I gathered Suzukake and the other researchers.

“Ayanokōji-sensei, this is the curriculum for the fourth-generation students who’ll be starting this year.”

Tabuchi operated a computer with dark circles under his eyes.

I looked through the materials projected on the big screen as he explained them to me.

When Suzukake was chosen to lead the second-generation students, he created a curriculum with 10 difficulty levels.

This time, the fourth-generation students will be given a difficulty level of 4.

“The dropout rate for those who are five, the first-generation, is 14%; the dropout rate for the second-generation students, who’re two, is 6%; and the dropout rate for the third-generation students, who’re one, is currently 6%. It’s predicted that more than 20% of second-generation children will drop out by the age of 5, and more than 25% of third-generation children will drop out in the future. We’ve been raising the difficulty level in stages, but we’re taking it a step further for the fourth generation.”

The higher the level of difficulty required of the children, the stricter the passing line will naturally become. In particular, Suzukake’s curriculum is structured in such a way that the difficulty level increases drastically after the children reach the age of six—when their foundations have been solidified.

It wouldn’t be surprising if the first-generation’s dropout rate also increases rapidly in the future.

“In fact, how much will change by continuing to increase the difficulty level?”

“We only have three data references, but even if we compare the first and third generation’s abilities at the same age, the lowest performing students increased by 11% and the highest performing students increased by 37%, respectively. This proves that the

educational method proposed by Suzukake-san is connected to the improvement of human abilities.”

The research so far seems to be going well.

If we continue to educate our students in the right way, we’ll eventually be able to produce children who’ll be incomparable to the first generation.

However, it’ll take many years to achieve this.

“There have also been some significant changes. As a typical example, we’ve analyzed the dropout’s aftermath and found that there were some problems. One is the extremely low ability to adapt to society. The reason for this is already clear—it’s due to the fact that they’ve lived 99% of the time only in the White Room. In particular, first-generation students understood the outside world only through materials’ and pictures’ fragmented depictions. It’d be impossible for them to imagine and draw cityscapes in their minds. The second and third generations showed some improvement as they began to learn through the use of images, but they lacked the everyday knowledge that Japanese children should have. Vending machines, streets, shopping malls, convenience stores, and supermarkets in the city, and their lack of recognition through hands-on experience caused a great deal of discomfort to outsiders. They may remember them in words and letters, but without actual experience, a natural response is impossible.”

“So? What’s the solution?”

“It’d be easier if we could take them out of the White Room, or to put it more simply, to have some kind of extracurricular activity, but of course, that’s not going to happen. The more people we have outside the White Room, the more we run the risk of the public knowing about the facility, and the impact that has on young children is immeasurable.”

Ishida continued his explanation and pulled out a pair of large goggles.

“That’s where the virtual console comes in. Using VR, children will be able to travel, learn, and memorize anywhere, at home or abroad.”

Souya followed in agreement.

“Ishida-san’s idea isn’t bad. It’s great that they’ll be able to virtually understand the minimum common sense that they should learn. Even if it’s in a virtual space, it can be imprinted as an experience by walking around in a perfectly reproduced world. The structure is the same when we go out into the outside world, so I think our adaptability will be much better than ever before.”

It’s a small price to pay for such a facility where you don’t have to go outside.

I agreed and approved the additional budget.

“The content of the curriculum seems to be fine.”

Tabuchi nodded in satisfaction, and Ishida and Souya stood up as well.

“I don’t mind if we use the virtual console. You can attempt anything else you want to try. But I would like to have a different curriculum for this fourth generation.”

“‘Different’, sir? What changes would you like me to make?”

I glanced at Suzukake, who had been sitting quietly.

“We are adopting the Beta curriculum.”

I told him, and the researchers tensed up.

“…Huh? What did you… just say?”

Suzukake was probably the most surprised of all.

“I said we are going to adopt the Beta curriculum. Don’t make me say it again.”

Suzukake created a curriculum with 10 levels of difficulty.

Compared to third-generation students, it's natural that the curriculum will be more rigorous and thorough upon birth, but the difficulty level increases significantly after age six when the foundation's being built. Even I, who don't know much about education, judged the Beta curriculum to be unfeasible in light of the first-generation children's limitations and discarded the Beta curriculum.

"I explained to you at the time that we had created a curriculum with 10 difficulty levels, but the Beta was a different dimension that would never be reached. In effect, we considered the fifth or sixth level to be the limit of human development."

"I'm sure of that. It's impossible to even compare the second and third-generation curriculums to the Beta curriculum. The current curriculum up to the third generation isn't easy to follow, and the results aren't remarkable at all. In such a situation, bringing up the Beta curriculum would only destroy the sample material…"

"I know that it's necessary in research to increase the difficulty little by little. But it takes time to climb up the stairs a single step at a time. I would like to see the human limits this one time in the White Room. I don't care if they all drop out."

"Of all the times… with your son here?"

"My son is the one who will receive the most rigorous education. This is a great opportunity. If we can create even one success in the Beta curriculum, it will lead to future research."

"…But what kind of criticism will I get from our supporters?"

"That's why I said I would adopt the Beta curriculum for my child's generation. It's for the sake of research. Feel free to tell me, and I don't care if he dies."

Everyone, including Ishida and the others, were stunned and speechless.

"Really… Are you sure you want to?"

As a researcher, Ishida may be eccentric, but he hadn't strayed from the path of humanity.

That's why he was so aggressive with me, but he must've realized that this was my decision.

"Yeah. The next fifth-generation students will be assigned the level four curriculum that was supposed to be assigned to the fourth-generation students. The fourth generation is the only exception. We can't easily implement an inhumane curriculum when there's no future in sight."

It wouldn't be too late to change the curriculum after all the fourth-generation results are in.

"I've prepared a reasonable sample of children for this one session."

I show them the list of the children who'll be in the fourth generation, which I had kept secret up to this point.

"This is—74 in all! That's more than twice the number of kids in the third generation!"

"Almost all of them were picked up from the 'have-nots' so that they can be used and discarded."

The Ohba group and the black market brokers connected to them aren't cheap, but a big sample is always better than a small one. I hope these people have understood how serious I am. In reality, however, only a few of the "have-nots" are children of businessmen. They must be dreaming of great growth in a harsh environment. They took the offer without any responsibility. However, I'm not telling the researchers which of the children belong to families of businessmen. I don't want that to get involved in any way.

Suzukake, who had been listening in silence, walked up to Ishida and the others who were reluctant to join the meeting.

"I myself have come to understand many things since I started working with Ishida-san and the others. There are certain lines that one must not cross as a human being, to the point that I regret having created the Beta curriculum. I can only see the results of the collapse, but still, as long as Ayanokōji-sensei insists on doing it, we are obligated to carry it out."

"But—!"

"As Ayanokōji-sensei said, this is a special case. It's also a great opportunity for me to reject the reckless curriculum that I myself have created."

Suzukake has grown up a lot over the past few years as he continues to be a leader.

They constantly clash with each other over the content of their research, but in the end, Ishida and the others nod their heads in agreement, acknowledging Suzukake's enthusiasm and determination.

"It's my responsibility to be the one heartbroken, and I'll be thoroughly involved in the education of the fourth-generation students."

As a representative of the White Room, I should be there to witness the results myself.

"…I understand what you're saying. Of course, I will follow your instructions. But first, may I make a suggestion on how to deal with the dropouts?"

"What do you mean?"

"To be clear, the dropped-out children's abilities far exceed those of ordinary people. I'd say that's a good accomplishment. It's too good to throw away…"

"At what success level are you talking? Do you think our goal is to get into a top university or to win some random competition?"

“No, that’s not–”

“That’s fine on the surface. But the real purpose is completely different. To protect this country from the world, to make this country strong, and to create people who have the power to run this country.”

There’s no way to create mere honor students who can succeed when sent over to politics.

What’s needed is the ability to outperform others.

A person with an unyielding, unshakable will of steel.

Only those described by others as monsters can make a breakthrough in this current corrupt political world.

“The well-known dropouts are carefully cared for and returned to their parents. As long as they have extraordinary abilities, they will be somewhat satisfied.”

“…And what about the nameless children?”

“As planned, send them to the facility we’ve set up and let them run wild. Of course, they’ll be trained not to talk about the White Room.”

“However, it will be very difficult for them to become independent and integrate into society.”

“So what? We educated them. They may have problems, but they’re still better than their peers. They have every chance to rise above them. Do you have a problem with that?”

Tabuchi is the only researcher who strongly believes in the general idea, and he is the only one who is resistant to it.

That’s why we have to give him a firm warning.

“Shut up and follow my orders. If someone disobeys my orders, I will cut them off without mercy, even if it’s you. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir. Excuse me, sir.”

A cell phone rang. It was Sakayanagi.

“I’m going to be out of the office for a while… We’ll continue our discussion, including how to address the Beta curriculum.”

I went out into the hallway and answered the phone as the door closed behind me.

“Ayanokōji-sensei…”

“What’s wrong, Sakayanagi? You seem very gloomy.”

“I didn’t want to contact you like this, but I heard that your son’s been born.”

“Oh, I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch. Things have been a little hectic.”

“…Are you sure you’re okay with this? Your long-awaited son?”

“This is what I had in mind when I decided to create the White Room. I don’t think that a man who educates abandoned babies can have a proper family.”

“But that’s a bit of a leap, isn’t it? The babies in the facility come from unfortunate backgrounds, having been abandoned. They are rather happy to be able to grow up in the White Room without any problems. But your son’s different. He deserves the love of his father and mother.”

“I’ve already made my decision.”

On the other end of the line, Sakayanagi gasped.

“I’m sorry to do this over the phone, but I have one thing to ask of you.”

“A proposal…?”

“You’re going to have a baby soon. I’m ready to accept your child if you need me to.”

“I’m not as strong as you. I can’t be as strong as you. For the sake of our unborn child, my wife and I will raise it with all the love we can muster.”

“I see. I knew you would say that.”

If it’s Sakayanagi, an excellent child with a legitimate education will be raised.

Will that be one of the achievements that I personally look forward to?

Chapter 5:

Stories of Innocent Children

THE COLOR. The color that spread across my field of vision.

The first thing I remember was equally as *white*.

As the name *White Room* implies, this facility is based on the color white.

The ceiling is no exception.

I was staring at that white ceiling in my first memory.

Before showing any interest in staring or playing with my fingertips, I simply wondered what this white ceiling was.

Day after day, I spent more and more time just staring at that ceiling.

At first, I cried. I cried because I missed people, and then I learned that no one was coming to help me.

Now that I look back on it, it was instinct, not logic.

This is the first thing a newborn baby, who cannot even speak, learns when it accepts its environment.

After that, I realized the existence of my fingers.

I spent all day long looking at, sucking, and licking my little fingers, and nothing else, in the emptiness.

The nourishment necessary for life was brought to us by the cold adults.

This is no different in the case of illness.

The treatment was carried out without hesitation, and daily life returned as if nothing had happened.

No one panicked, no one worried, no one rejoiced.

Eventually, you learn. You realized that you're being carefully cared for here.

Human beings have feelings of joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure.

But none of them are of much use in this facility.

The children, with their still undeveloped brains, learned that early on.

No wonder. Whether you laugh or cry, get angry or sad, the instructors weren't there to help you.

The only time I could move forward was when I achieved something.

The first time I remember that I recognized communication as a language was when I was two years old.

The instructor was sitting in front of me and I was sitting in front of him.

There was nothing in between—just the instructor holding out both of his open hands to me.

Not long afterward, the instructor placed a small little gummy bear in his right hand in a very conspicuous way.

For the children living in this facility, this snack was a rarity.

The sweetness that they were usually deprived of. As a child, I was no exception; I remember having the same cravings as anyone else.

“Guess where the gummy is, and you can eat it.”

The adult who held a gummy bear in his right hand extended it to me.

His expression was stern and almost expressionless.

On the other hand, the child facing him—me, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka—was also emotionless.

Both of us had the same expressionless face, but I was in a natural state while the instructor was consciously trying to be silent.

And the other kids were also naturally emotionless.

I could sense that the other children were well aware of the fact that emotions can be a stumbling block. There were one-on-ones between adults who hid their emotions and children who had minimal emotions.

“I’ll give you a chance until you miss three times.”

The instructor muttered to himself in front of me.

“…”

I still don’t understand the adult language—the meaning of every syllable within those words.

Missing, chance—neither of these words can truly be understood by a two-year-old child.

However, they can instinctively sense what’s being appealed to.

I could sense what was being asked of me.

I touched his right hand, just as I had seen.

Without hesitation, the instructor opened his right hand and gave me a small gummy bear.

At the same time, other children were also trying to guess the gummy's location.

All of the instructors clutched the gummy in their right hands, and all of them answered correctly.

"Next!"

This time, he held the gummy bear in his right hand, but immediately after that, he put it back in his left hand and offered it to me.

Of course, I touched the left hand without hesitation. Another correct answer.

This simple process was repeated twice more, yielding a total of four gummies.

Although they weren't very sweet, they were a valuable snack in this White Room and were well received by the children. I remember that I, without exception, enjoyed the taste of these gummies.

“Next.”

Fifth time. This time, the instructor crossed his arms behind his back, grabbed a gummy bear, and held it out to me.

The strength of his grip and the position of each hand were almost the same.

The instructor’s expression didn’t change, nor did his gaze.

In this case, there was no way to judge objectively which of the instructor’s hands clenched the gummy.

The probability was 50/50 in either case.

In that case, time efficiency was the priority here.

I randomly touched the right hand; it was empty. The other children were divided into two groups, and although the ratio of children who picked the right hand was a little higher than the left, there was no clear reason for this. However, as expected, all the instructors held the gummy bear in their left hands.

“Next.”

The instructor hid his hand behind his back again, clenched it, and then brought his arms forth.

I wondered if he would continue to make us guess the 50/50.

There was no point in choosing either of them, but I dared to choose the left one.

No—.

After a short thought, I decided not to answer immediately but to observe what was nearby.

The children were so focused on the instructor and the gummies in front of them that they neglected to pay attention to their surroundings.

This time, the majority of the children pointed to the left hand, but the correct answer was the right hand.

Then, the instructor in front of me was most likely holding the

gummy bear in his right hand.

I pointed to his right hand, and after a short pause, it opened to reveal a green gummy bear.

“Next.”

You weren’t praised for guessing it correctly, but at least you were allowed to eat the gummy.

Rolling the gummy on the tip of my tongue, I concentrated again. The instructor clutched the gummy again behind his back.

He held out each of his hands at the same time.

Of course, this time, I observed my surroundings in the same way…

When all the children had finished pointing, there was no sign of the instructors opening their hands.

“You are the last one.”

This meant that they won't open their hands until all the children had given their answers.

Since there was no hint at all, I continued to point to his right hand.

All at once, the instructors opened the palm of the indicated hand.

However, all of them missed it. Both the children who pointed to their right hands and the children who pointed to their left hands got it incorrect.

At this point, many children missed three times and won't be getting another chance.

I had only one chance left.

"Next."

Similarly to the previous two occasions, the gummy was clenched behind the instructor's back. There was no way to tell which hand it was in from the outside and no sign of hands opening after the few remaining children had finished playing.

In this case, it didn't make any difference whether the right hand or the left hand was used.

I wondered if this was really true.

…Or…

One last chance.

If it wasn't held in either of these hands, then…

The instructor didn't say which hand had the gummy bear.

He only asked us to point to where the gummy bear is.

So it was possible that they were hidden somewhere other than in the left or right hand.

I let that childish thought run through my mind and pointed behind without touching either hand.

"…"

He didn’t answer and just stared at my movements.

“Why are you pointing back?”

“Gummy, hand, no.”

I replied in such a way that showed I still didn’t have perfect control over the language.

Without saying a word, the instructor opened both hands at the same time.

Then, I found a small gummy bear in his right hand.

“That’s too bad. The right hand is the correct one.”

The instructor then popped the small gummy in his mouth.

One of the two remaining children had answered correctly for the right hand and was given a gummy bear.

“I’ll give you one more chance, just for the heck of it.”

He took out a gummy bear and held it in his hands behind his back as if to repeat the process, and stuck out his arms.

I thought his hands were empty by hiding them behind his back, but in fact, they were held in his right hand. Then, did I simply miss the 50/50, and it was never hidden from the beginning of this match?

Or, after hiding it twice, did he hold it in his right hand, anticipating that we would read it that way? The possibility that both hands were empty is more probable than the possibility that they were holding something. The other remaining child pointed to the instructor's left hand.

What's the right thing to do…?

Was it the right hand, the left hand, or was it hidden behind?

"Behind."

After thinking about it, I took a gamble. I rejected the right and left hands, judging both to be empty.

The instructor opened his hands. In his left hand was a small gummy bear.

"Too bad. Another miss. Are you disappointed?"

It's true, I was disappointed.

I nodded slightly.

It wasn't because I wanted gummy bears.

It was more like frustration that I was wrong.

"I guess this kid is different after all."

The adults gathered around and whispered to each other.

My two-year-old mind couldn't comprehend the meaning of the complicated words, so I only remember them as a list of words.

"All the children, with the exception of Kiyotaka, were honestly trying to guess everything between left or right. But he observed the choices of those around them and was clearly aware of the possibility of a third option, which was the option that the gummy was hidden

behind our backs. Moreover, even after proving that it wasn't hiding behind my back, he didn't abandon the possibility. This isn't the thinking of a two-year-old."

"You're overthinking this, aren't you?"

"But in all the tests I've done, this is clearly the only child who thinks differently; he's the only one who has a different point of view."

In the midst of these incomprehensible thoughts, the instructors' words were etched in my memory.

I thought, in the future, I may be able to get some hints from this conversation.

When I grew up, I could just open the drawers to my memories.

"…The way he's looking at me is creepy. I wonder if he even understands what we're talking about."

“No way… He’s two years old. There’s no way he understands more than the bare minimum of what we’re saying.”

“That’s true, but…”

A buzzer sounded, announcing the end of the test.

The adults looked at each other, ordered the children to stand by, and walked out.

Given this familiar scenery, the kids saw them off without any of them crying.

Any fear that we’d be left alone has long since disappeared.

There was no help for us.

This was something we learned in our bones at the age of two.

1

Another fragment of memory to be dug up.

In the process of erasing unnecessary memories, there are things that come to mind.

“Take your seat and state your name.”

State your name—.

The brain received the instruction, and the brain quickly transmitted the signal to the throat.

“Kiyotaka.”

It was a symbol. A sequence of letters.

An important element to distinguish humans.

All of us White Room students were taught names as one of the ways to identify individuals. However, when we were young, we weren’t told our surnames, and all the instructors called us by our first names.

Although I had no way of knowing it at the time, there would be an inconvenience created by teaching us our surnames. It seems that it was a rule based on the fear that it might lead to the children’s identification in the future.

By the time the children were four years old, a new curriculum was beginning to be implemented one after another.

“Now then, let’s commence the test.”

The most important of these was a written test.

All students straightened their posture and faced the test papers.

The test consisted of five writing systems: hiragana, katakana, *the alphabet*[11], numbers, and simple kanji.

Since we’d already spent a whole year being thoroughly taught reading and writing when we were three, there was no hesitation in their fingertips’ movements as they held the pen.

The students were penalized if they didn’t achieve a certain level of performance in a limited amount of time.

In addition, the students were also required to have good handwriting.

Even if your handwriting was good, you won’t receive any points if you get the answer wrong, but if you write poorly in a hurry, points will be deducted from your score, so we had to be careful. No one at this facility asked whether or not we can solve the problems we face.

This is only true because the only children left were those that were capable of solving them..

Those who couldn’t were dropped at the age of three.

Our group, called the fourth generation, had a total of 74 students in the early years.

However, as mentioned above, children who were deemed to be unable to do so at the age of three had already dropped out of the White Room.

Therefore, all 61 of us then shared almost all of our time together, excluding bedtime.

The written test was 30 minutes long, but there was enough time to complete it in about half to two-thirds of the time limit if we solved the questions without hesitation.

This was true for all the previous written exams held in the White Room.

Solve the equation and move on to the next. Determine the answer and write it down.

At the same time, you review the previous question to see if you've made any mistakes.

When I finished, I raised my right hand straight up.

After signaling that I was done, I turned the paper over.

Getting a perfect score on the written exam was the minimum requirement. At the same time, you were required to be a neat and speedy writer.

This was the 7th written exam since I turned four years old, and I've won first place four times in a row. The first time I took the written test, I was ranked 24th, the second time 15th, and the third time 7th. I didn't have a good start.

It took me a while to figure out how the written exams worked, its logic, and its efficiency.

Once I solved that, I haven't been overtaken, and I myself have been improving my certainty even more.

The gap between me and the second-place finisher was widening with each written exam, and now the time gap was about five minutes.

Regardless if I got a perfect score or first place, I would never be praised by anyone.

When everyone finished, we moved on to the next part of the curriculum.

“Now we’ll start Judo. Everyone please change and follow the instructor to another room.”

Martial arts. This was another curriculum added when we turned four, as was the written test.

I’ve already been taught judo for four months.

While being trained in the basics, we progressed to the stage where we had to fight in actual combat.

“Haa!”

My vision shook and I felt a strong pain in my back.

In the confrontation with the instructor, the children were always made to taste this bitterness.

I was no exception.

“Get up!”

The relentless slamming into the floor, making it impossible to breathe, didn’t allow you a break.

If I didn’t get up immediately, I would be reprimanded again and again. Next, arms that were many times thicker than mine flew at me.

I was slammed to the floor again, and I tried desperately to catch myself, but I couldn’t absorb the damage.

While I was being knocked down to the ground, similar occurrences were happening all over the place.

All the kids were crying and sobbing while being thrashed around.

“I can’t… I can’t stand up…!”

As if begging for forgiveness, Mikuru clung weakly to the instructor’s leg.

“Still, get up!”

The girl was forced to stand up as the instructor forcibly shook off her hands, but her body seemed to be immobilized.

The fact that’s a girl wasn’t taken into consideration here.

“I told you to stand up!”

The girl was kicked, spun around and around on the floor, and sprayed vomit all over the place.

Of course, the adults weren’t kicking seriously.

Even so, it was obvious to everyone that the force of the kick was unbelievably strong.

“I don’t give a damn, even if you’re a kid! You already know that!”

The average mind would have a strong resistance to hurting a child

this much.

But the instructors who've been called to the White Room aren't ordinary.

They were the kind of people who had no qualms about sending women and children to the brink of death.

"No one will cry if you disappear! Stand up and face them on your own!"

Mikuru, convulsing and unfocused, put her hands on the floor and tried to get up.

"Yes! That's it! Show some spirit!

"Uh, uuh… Ugh… gh…!"

But the previous kick Mikuru took was critical, and she collapsed and lost consciousness.

"Damn! You gutless bastard! Get her out of here! Get out of my way!"

The instructor, who had been making irritating footsteps, shouted angrily as he forcibly removed Mikuru from the room.

Do you believe such a scene is tragic?

If so, you should change how you think.

This is only the beginning. Excessive reactions like Mikuru's were decreasing day by day, and even the expression of pain was fading away.

Even human instincts were eliminated by the brain as superfluous functions.

It was natural to be thrown. It was natural to have difficulty breathing. It was natural to hurt yourself to the point of sobbing. And even thinking about it was a waste.

The only way out of the situation was to keep trying to reduce the number of times you get thrown within the time limit.

Of course, the most ideal situation was to defeat your opponent.

But the opponent was far superior in strength, size, and skill.

Needless to say, it wasn't easy to bridge the gap between adults and children.

After being forced to fight intensely and breathlessly, everyone rose to their feet, battered and bruised.

After an intense education from our instructors, we were obliged to take part in hand-to-hand combat with three others at the end of the day.

The children never look tired.

I've learned that any prey that seems weak was doomed to be hunted by the strong.

My record was 144 fights, 127 wins and 17 losses. And I was currently on a 64-fight winning streak.

The fights were rotated between male and female opponents, but Shiro stood in front of me, silently waiting for the signal to begin.

Shiro had an overwhelmingly good record of 135 wins and 9 losses.

I've played against Shiro twice, winning once and losing once.

I lost my first Randori[12] match, but I had not lost since the first rotation; however, among the other students, Shiro had the best judo skills.

Because he was a formidable opponent, he was able to sharpen his sensitivity even more.

Shiro had always been aggressive and took the initiative in his fights against others, but today, in his third match, he seemed to be taking a wait-and-see attitude, aiming to create counter-attacks.

This was something I welcomed, as I wanted to gain experience in attacking a strong opponent.

"Begin!"

At the instructor’s announcement, we fought each other to the bitter end with defeat on our backs.

Win or lose, we moved on to the next lesson as if nothing had happened.

Karate is a martial art that started somewhat later.

Here, the students were subjected to more direct blows from the instructors than in judo.

The variety of martial arts will probably increase again as we reach five or six years old.

That was the common inference among all the children.

2

By the time I was five years old, the number of children had dwindled even further down to about 50 at one point.

No one cared. There was no time to care.

Here, the only thing they want is our ability.

There was no end.

No, if there was an end, it was endlessly far away.

Once you falter, you'll never be able to catch up again.

Do you believe this is extraordinary?

I don't. This was everyday life for me.

One day, when the number of people in the group had already decreased considerably, we had dinner together.

The meal was being served with everyone present. During the meal, the instructor left the table and the children were left alone. However, we've never had a direct conversation.

The whole time, I've only heard their voices through the instructor.

Why don't we talk to each other?

It wasn't forbidden by the instructors.

We just didn't have conversations because there wasn't a need to talk in the first place.

We knew each other's names through the instructors, we knew how good each one was in their studies, and we knew how athletic each of us was. All of our inner abilities were laid bare.

There was no food that they like or dislike.

The rule of eating only what was served applied to all of the children.

In other words, there was no need for dialogue regarding meals.

There was no sense of fellowship among us students.

The others' presence that neither helps nor hinders is just, somehow, no different from the scenery around us.

"I don't like…"

I heard a girl named Yuki, who always sat in front of me, whisper.

It wasn't problematic behavior, since we weren't forbidden to speak during the meal. It was just that no one spoke because no one felt the need to.

This was the first change in the precedent.

I thought she would stop talking because no one responded, but Yuki didn't.

"Do you like it, Kiyotaka?"

She asked me if I liked or disliked the carrots in front of me.

To answer or not to answer.

But to begin with, I've never thought of the concept of liking or disliking carrots.

I only considered them as one of the nutrients that we should consume.

The main nutrient in carrots is Beta-carotene.

It has the ability to change into vitamin A when taken into the body.

It's effective in preventing cellular aging and maintaining healthy skin and mucous membranes. It's also very important for immunity against viruses.

"Do you like carrots?"

"I don't like them either."

The answer wasn't from me, but from Shiro, who was sitting on my left.

Yuki looked at him in surprise.

While I was distracted by the dialogue between the two, I checked the surveillance camera.

Of course, the instructors were watching our meals on a daily basis. There was no way they couldn't have picked up on the sound. Since there was no response from the instructors, and they didn't criticize us or anything, this kind of conversation must be allowed.

However, we've never been asked to engage in dialogue with each other.

As long as there was no merit in bothering to engage in dialogue, there was no need to follow the two and respond.

Still… I thought about it for a moment.

You either like carrots or you don't.

…The answer was: I don't hate them.

After the meal, I've always had a little trouble. I never learned how to kill time.

Just sitting and waiting was the easiest and only option I had.

However, Yuki wasn't like that, and after dinner, she walked around the room by herself.

I thought it was a waste of energy to walk, but I kept silent and watched her.

She walked around the small room for about three laps when she passed right in front of me.

"Wa…!"

Yuki almost tripped and fell in front of me.

I instantly stretched my arm and prevented her from falling down.

"It's strange to fall down in the middle of nowhere, isn't it?"

After I analyzed the situation, Yuki widened her eyes and looked surprised.

"Or is it just fatigue? No, it doesn't look like that to me."

I couldn't understand why she fell down.

And it seemed the same was true for Yuki.

"Yeah. I'm not tired, but I fell down. Weird, isn't it?."

When she said this, a look came over her face that I had never seen before.

It was the first expression created by her facial muscles, the orbicularis oculi muscle around her eyes, and the wrinkled brow muscles near her eyebrows.

I had never seen such a look on the other students' or adults' faces.

The girl herself seemed to understand my wonder.

“That… Now, I…”

You can see the confusion and bewilderment on her face.

I can see why.

I never learned that. I was never taught that look.

But I know it.

It didn’t take me long to realize that it was a smile.

It was an instinct that we’re born with, or perhaps even before we’re born.

That may be why she could express it without having to learn it.

3

The White Room children aren't taught many of the rules required to survive in this world.

However, there were a few strict regulations.

This didn't change even in the latter half of our fifth year.

7:00 AM.

"It's time to get up."

The timer rang without a second's delay, accompanied by an uncaring voice announcing the time, and the children in the small room began to wake up.

Before we rose from our beds, a staff member would come into the room and remove the electrodes attached to our bodies.

Then he'd get up and immediately check our health.

The busy, mundane daily routine unfolded in front of us.

After checking for any changes in height, weight, etc., we would go to the bathroom to urinate.

Urine samples were taken once a month, and a small amount of blood would be drawn at the same time.

After the examination, the staff members leave the building without exchanging greetings.

We were then rehydrated and warmed up with 30 minutes of basic training.

After keeping daily physical records such as grip strength measurements, everyone would step into the training room at the same time and complete the quota assigned to each gender. There was no option as to what would happen if the quota wasn't achieved.

The quotas were to be met by everyone because it was a given that everyone would meet their quotas.

Those who fail to do so won't be allowed to set foot in this room

from tomorrow onwards.

By the time these steps were fulfilled, it would be 8:00 AM.

At the time, breakfast was more nutritionally oriented and more efficient than it was in my earlier childhood, with supplements and blocked nutrition.

To eat well or not to eat well.

Whether I liked it or not.

It was as irrelevant as ever.

Eat the food in the order in which it was served.

That was all there was to it.

After the meal, the day’s curriculum would begin.

The fields of study were diverse, ranging from Japanese and mathematics to economics and political science. The day's curriculum was repeated until noon, with small breaks in between.

Lunch was the same as breakfast, and the curriculum resumed in the afternoon.

After sitting at our desks studying until 5:00 PM, the physical training began.

It all ended at 7:00 PM.

During this time, we don't speak a single word of our own accord.

After dinner, bathing, and physical examinations, it would be 9:00 PM.

This would be the first time we held what's called a "meeting," a time for conversing to review the day.

The children were alone in a small space with no teachers present.

But they weren't free to talk about any topic.

How did you feel and how did you cope with today's studies?

This was a time for the students to organize and examine their feelings and responses to the day's studies.

Adults didn't get involved unless they recognized that it was an unnecessary private conversation.

Even silence was allowed, regardless of profit or loss, as long as the rules were followed.

The set time was only 30 minutes, but I always merely listened to what was being said and had never felt like actively talking. Even though children were allowed to talk among themselves, their conversations were overheard by the adults.

Even this dialogue was part of the curriculum.

However, no special quota was given.

At the same time, it may be a measure to draw out the children's true feelings.

If we set a quota, it would naturally turn into a dialogue for that purpose.

At 9:30 p.m., we would all be sent back to our rooms.

We were required to go to the bathroom and lie down in bed by 10:00 p.m.

Electrodes were attached and the lights would go out.

Medical checkups were always required.

Every day, 365 days a year, there was always time to check on the day's progress.

This was the end of the day.

From waking up to going to bed, this was the educational policy.

Our schedule was set down to the minute.

A day in the White Room.

A world that never changes each year.

4

Every few months or years, there came a time of great change.

That's when some of the children began to have trouble keeping up with the curriculum.

The level of study increased by two or three difficulty levels, and little by little they began to fall behind.

It was clear that even after the same amount of time spent learning, there were differences among the individuals.

When they were first taught addition.

When they were first taught multiplication.

They started out equally, but then others realized that they were superior to each other.

Along the way, they can rewind and move on to the next step, but often the child who is noticeably behind stumbles at the next step.

I'm sure that the adults didn't welcome the children dropping out.

However, they couldn't keep children who weren't keeping up with the program in the same place indefinitely.

Leaving a child who wasn't keeping up created dissonance, and if you try to accommodate the child who wasn't keeping up, the others' rhythm, who were ahead, would be lost.

The next learning opportunity would be lost.

This was why it was necessary to gradually decrease the number of children.

"*10 minutes remaining.*"

Prior to the many children dropouts, one of the many tests was a special high-difficulty written curriculum.

During the course of repeated daily study, I noticed something—the difficulty level of this special written test was raised according to the top score. In other words, a perfect score slid up the scale, thus a child

with a previous low score would have a more difficult time on the following test.

On the other hand, if the top score was lower than the perfect score, the ceiling was also lowered.

No matter how tough the questions were, there was no room for minor miscalculations, careless omissions, or excuses.

That was why children repeatedly checked their answers even after they solved all the problems on time.

They desperately clutched at their test papers, because even a single mistake would mean the end of the test.

While others around me were busy, I kept staring at the front of the room with a pen in my hand. I kept pretending that I was still taking the test.

In reality, I had already finished answering all the questions and was spending the remaining time idly.

I wasn't worried about the possibility of making a mistake.

Because I knew I didn't make such a mistake.

The questions on the test paper and the answers I wrote down were imprinted in my mind word for word.

"*5 minutes to go.*"

With the announcement, the sound of brushing around me became more intense.

You hear the sound of the erasers' pressure getting stronger from the seat next to you as if they were in an impatient state of mind.

The difficulty of this test had increased by several levels from the previous exam.

During math class, when the students were solving problems such as the equality conditions of additive and synergistic averages, something unusual happened.

I had almost half of the 30 minutes left to answer the final problem and was staring at the front of the room for the rest of the time, waiting for the signal to finish.

Suddenly a man, a representative of the White Room, entered the room with a grim look on his face.

It wasn't unheard of for an adult to show up in the middle of an exam, when a person who wasn't able to keep up with the exam hyperventilates and collapses, or has a seizure or convulsions.

So far, I hadn't noticed any sign of such conditions.

Or, very rarely, a child becomes so intent on solving the problems that they recklessly cheat.

But I soon learned that it was me, of all people, who was the adult's

target.

He stopped a little to my left, looked down at the test paper, and then looked at me.

“Kiyotaka.”

I looked up as he called my name.

“Remember well. A person who has power yet neglects to use it is a fool.”

Of course they knew what I was doing.

“Leave the room.”

I followed the man out of the room.

“What the hell are you doing, Kiyotaka?”

“What do you mean?”

“‘What do you mean’? You don’t understand what I’m asking, do you?”

I was shown to a small private room where I was made to sit down.

“I see you’ve completed all the questions.”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure you’re going to get a perfect score?”

“No.”

“Of course not.”

The questions on the test were deliberately constrained to 80 points.

“Why did you hold back?”

“You didn’t instruct me not to hold back.”

I knew that I wasn’t going to fall behind the wayside just because I didn’t get a perfect score.

“You do realize that you’re already leading this term, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then there’s only one reason why you held back.”

The man pointed at me and said, “Because you noticed how this curriculum works. If you get a perfect score, the curriculum for the fourth generation will become more difficult. Naturally, the number of dropouts will increase. Is that what you wanted to prevent?”

That was the correct assumption.

“Surely you haven’t developed a sense of camaraderie with the kids.”

I see. So that’s the conclusion the adults have drawn.

“Is that what it looks like?”

“Yes, that’s what I see.”

“And how did Ayanokōji-sensei feel about it?”

I was interested in his answer.

“Holding yourself back to assist your fellow students isn’t helping him at all.”

Is that really true? I asked myself.

“You’re wrong.”

I denied it.

“Then try to convince me.”

When ordered to do so, I put my own thoughts into words.

“In the first place, I’ve never recognized the children around me as my friends.”

“Then why didn’t you try to get a perfect score?”

“The instructors already knew that I would get a perfect score this time. There’s no need to write the answers down on paper every time. It’s more time-efficient to leave it blank.”

Using unnecessary energy was nothing but a waste.

“It’s hubris. Knowledge fades with time. That’s why you always do your best to remember. Even if you have the ability to get a perfect score, making mistakes and misremembering can happen. You need to show me your best at all times.”

“I won’t make a mistake.”

“That’s a bold statement.”

“And that’s not the only reason I hold back.”

“What?”

“I know that if I hadn’t held back, the percentage of kids who would drop out would be much higher than it is now. So, if I cut corners, we’re replacing a world where kids who would normally have dropped out are still here.”

“Yes. That’s called camaraderie.”

“No, it’s not. I thought of it as a loss of experience, a loss of contact with the children who are going to drop out.”

The instructors looked at each other with questioning looks on their faces.

The knowledge-hungry brain wants to both analyze patterns and seek answers.

“It’s easy to dismiss them at this stage. But I’m still in the learning stage. I want to know what I can see and feel from the weak.”

“So you think it’s too early for them to drop out?”

I nodded. Soon most of the kids around here won’t be able to keep up.

“You think your plan is above ours? It’s up to us to decide who is dropping out.”

“Of course it’s your choice. That’s how the White Room is.”

It was futile to try to crush this man with logic.

All that matters was that there was never a rule against holding back.

But it wouldn't be easy to add a rule against cutting corners.

Even if I got a score of zero, the instructor, who's a third party, would be the one to judge me for holding back.

They won't fail the exam because of that. However, it doesn't mean that the instructor can treat a person who got a score of 0 as if they had scored a 100, either.

"Is it OK with you? If he thinks this way, let's see what happens."

"What do you think, Suzukake?"

"I agree with Ishida-san. If he does something we haven't thought of, I'll be very happy."

The man was silent for a while and then dropped his gaze on me.

"Do what you want. But don't forget what I said."

Not utilizing one's power is a fool's errand.

Whether it was true or not, I decided to remember it as a moment of interest.

At the same time, however, another emotion peeked out.

I was beginning to feel that I didn't like this man.

I began to understand how Yuki felt when she said she didn't like carrots a little more.

Just as I was being taken back to the rooms to sit down, the buzzer sounded.

All at once, the children placed their pens on their desks.

That was the rule.

But there was one sound that didn't vanish after the buzzer sounded: the sound of a pen crunching on a piece of paper.

This wasn't unusual.

A boy continued his test, breathing hard and sobbing.

His attitude to continue the test didn't change even when the door opened and the adults entered the room.

He was forcibly grabbed by his right arm.

"No! Let go of me! No! I can still solve it! I can do it! W-waah, waah! I don't want to drop out!"

In addition to the excessive pressure, he realized his defeat and sprayed his gastric juice all over the test paper.

The vomit spread from the instructors' necks and down onto their clothes, but the adults didn't care, they restrained the child from both sides and dragged them out without regard to the child's resistance. The children were emotionless, with the only exception being when they drop out. In this case, the inevitable end arouses their survival instincts and they lose their rationality. Some of the children looked at each other, but most of them stared ahead without taking any action.

"Uwaaaaah! Uwaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!"

A scream never heard before reverberated through the room and permeated through the automatic door.

As soon as he was taken out, the door closed and silence returned.

They really don’t know anything, do they?

They can get any number of points in this particular curriculum and never drop out.

If they can’t even recognize that, it’s inevitable that they’ll drop out.

5

I had no likes or dislikes.

It not only applied to food, the curriculum was no different as well.

Music (piano, violin, etc.), calligraphy, tea ceremony, and other traditional cultural pursuits.

The only thing that I was unenthusiastic about was the altered curriculum, which was newly introduced after I turned six. It introduced a half-day class held only once or twice a month. It was a class called “travel” using a virtual console.

All the children stood up and put on large goggles at the same time.

Our vision went black, but soon the screen lit up and the program was displayed, and it began after a few moments.

“The curriculum will now focus on Japan, whereas in the past we’ve studied American cities such as New York and Hawaii. First, we’ll start with public transportation.”

This was the basic premise of the course. It introduced a world that wasn’t just a White Room.

This was still learning time, and children were told early on that they won’t leave this place until they become adults.

The virtual console reproduced the same outside scenery in 360 degrees with such quality that it could be mistaken for the real thing, and the sound was combined with the visuals to create a sense of presence. Even the people passing by were reproduced, showing a businessman in a suit, an old man with a cane, an elderly woman trying to get into a cab, and other street scenes.

Of course, children were also present, but unlike the reality outside, they didn’t appear to be playing or having fun at all; instead, they showed inorganic, machine-like movements.

We learned the history and structure of the world so that one day, when we go out into the outside world, we’ll be able to adapt to it without problems.

I knew it was necessary, but I had a problem with this way of

learning.

One of the reasons why I disliked it was because it was accompanied by an indescribable feeling of discomfort.

It's what was commonly described as 3D motion sickness.

It's possible that the brain misperceives it as a hallucination if the balance between visual perception and the semicircular canals are incorrect.

There's no way to stop the sickness by individual power alone, and the only way would be to let the brain learn over time.

It wasn't so hard that it was impossible to continue, but it was the reason why I didn't like it.

Of course, the virtual console wasn't only used as a device to perceive the outside world visually but also as a tool to train observation and insight.

We were asked to detect unnatural points in the views that unfolded in various locations.

If what we pointed out was wrong or the unnatural point itself couldn't be found, the instructors gave us unrelenting guidance.

The methods of guidance varied, but it mainly consisted of those that caused pain to the students themselves.

That's why we used our eyes to thoroughly observe, not even sparing the blink of an eye.

The more we feared for our lives, the more our senses sharpened and we began to see things that we couldn't see before.

"Next, let's take a walk in Tokyo on the virtual console."

As we virtually walked through Tokyo, the screen suddenly went dark.

The instructors' voices that I was listening to stopped, and I was engulfed in silence.

"Everyone take off your goggles."

The voice came from inside the room, not through the microphone, and we all followed the instruction at once.

"There's an equipment issue. That's it for today's virtual console lesson. We still have less than half an hour before the next curriculum, so please stay here."

With those instructions, the goggles in everyone's hands were retrieved.

"Stand by…"

Many of the kids were left standing, seemingly intent on passing the time.

In the end, it seemed that the equipment problem couldn't be resolved quickly enough, and the instructors decided to move on to

another curriculum.

The children were, of course, quickly lined up and turned their attention to the next part of the program.

“We’re going to read out the names one by one. The first person whose name is called will move with the instructor.”

With these instructions, the first three names were called.

In the end, I was the last one to be called. I obeyed, and the instructor walked slowly and invited me into the private room.

There were no other children in the room, and it was a one-on-one with the instructor.

In the center of the room was a small table and two pipe chairs.

“Come on, sit down.”

The instructor said, tapping the table and ordering me to immediately sit down.

I sat down in front of the instructor and the five cards in his hands were placed on the table.

Each card had a different symbol on it.

From left to right it showed a circle, square, cross, star, and wave.

“I’m going to put into practice what I’ll ask of you to do. Watch carefully.”

The instructor faced me, and he took the lead in turning over all the cards.

Since the backs of the five cards displayed the same pattern, it was impossible to tell which card had which mark when the cards were shuffled in this state.

Was he asking me to guess and show him a particular card among them?

That was what I thought, but…

The five cards were rearranged.

“You’ll be given only 10 seconds each time.”

“…Square.”

The instructor then flipped the leftmost card.

A star came out.

The instructor continued to flip the cards, stating the symbols.

“Circle, star, cross, wave—”

The second to the fifth cards were a wave, square, cross, and circle, respectively.

Only the fourth one, a cross, matched and was thus correct. The percentage of correct answers was 20%.

“This is one round, and it’ll be repeated ten times. Watch carefully.”

Five guesses, ten times. It was 50 times in total.

The same thing was repeated without any hesitation.

The final percentage of correct answers was about 30% with 15 correct answers out of 50.

“So, now it’s your turn, Kiyotaka.”

“Yes.”

I took my seat in place of the instructor, who got up from his seat.

What was the purpose of this practice?

I don’t think it was to develop psychic abilities.

In other words, to train intuition?

No, it was hard to think of that as legitimate or realistic training.

The five cards were mixed by the instructor.

When mixing the cards, the instructor always used an overhand shuffle.

Was this just a habit, or was it intentional?

It was impossible to judge, but it was easy to dismiss it as meaningless.

I wondered, if it did have a meaning, what it was.

The table's material made it seem smooth and easy to do a wash shuffle while it was on the table.

Should I dare to use an overhand shuffle?

Another thing that bothered me was that the instructor didn't always line up the cards from the same position.

Sometimes he started from the left end, sometimes from the middle, then from the right end, then from the left end.

I didn't think there were any kind of rules as far as I saw from the 10 times.

This couldn't be dismissed as a habit.

On the other side of the card, I didn't feel any difference even if I stared at it carefully.

In other words, I didn't think that either the instructor or I could distinguish between the two.

However, there was a big difference between me and the instructor.

That is, whether we can or can't touch the cards.

When mixing the cards, when distributing the cards, when flipping the cards, only the instructor was doing all the motions.

What if the instructor didn't want it to be sensed?

It was only because the instructor could see the card, whose answer should be invisible to him.

But even if I could see it, I still couldn't touch it.

I wasn't forbidden from reaching out and touching it, but would that be the proper move?

It was now clear that this wasn't just an exercise in intuition.

Then, a possible rule of thumb was…

Five cards were laid out and the 10-second count began.

In order to increase the percentage of correct answers by even 1%,

the first conspicuous mark must be decided upon.

“A star…”

I answered, and the instructor flipped over the leftmost card with an unchanging expression on his face.

“It’s a star.”

It’s still just one-fifth correct.

“Wave, square, cross, circle.”

The instructor flipped from the second card to the fifth.

The marks were turned over and matched just what I said they would, thus making them correct.

“You still have nine more to go.”

“Yes.”

After five correct answers, I was convinced of one rule.

Then the rest was easy.

I then went on to play the remaining 9 rounds. I guessed all 45 cards.

“100% correct…”

As I finish collecting the previous 50 cards, the instructor looked at me.

In his eyes, I saw an emotion that wasn’t there before.

“I didn’t realize you had your eye on me from the very first phase.”

The instructor showed the first practice. If all he had to do was explain the rules, he would’ve only had to show the same repetitive content once or at most twice.

However, the instructor silently went through all of the exercises up to ten times, regardless of whether they were successful or not.

This meant that it wasn’t a mere explanation of the rules.

They hid the fact that it was a memory test to see if I could reach that realization as quickly as possible.

“And on top of that, a perfect memory. It’s hard to believe…”

“I wonder if you’ve also had them memorized, all lined up the same way they were the first time.”

“…No way. I only remembered the five symbols based on the small scratches on the cards that I couldn’t see, and the only reason I was able to line them up the same way as the first time was that I received instructions from the intercom in my ear.”

“So that’s why the cameras were installed in the ceiling.”

“…You were aware of that as well.”

“I knew it was strange because it was like that guy was talking to me.”

When I entered the room, I was approached by a man who seemed to squeeze my free gaze toward a certain part of the room.

It was also unnatural that the instructor urged me to hurry up and sit down.

If for some reason he wanted to proceed with the curriculum quickly, he could have done it faster by rushing me even before I entered the room, or by showing me the practices.

“You’re the first one to pass this curriculum in one shot… You can go back.”

“Excuse me.”

Considering it was an alternative to my least favorite curriculum, the virtual console, I could say that it was many times more enjoyable.

6

Inside the White Room, there were rooms dedicated to various curricula.

One of them was a heated swimming pool where one could swim all year round.

Swimming was considered to play a very important role in developing physical skills.

Swimming was also ideal for children's immature bodies because of its low impact on the body itself. The time spent in contact with the water was valuable for the children to relieve stress.

Swimming was taught for two hours at a time, with a 30-minute lesson at the beginning, a 10-minute break afterward, and 30 minutes of competitive swimming with races and target times.

After that, the children were given 30 minutes of free time.

They could swim in the water or take a break.

I always made it a habit to spend the remaining 30 minutes by the pool, observing the children.

"I knew I'd find you here. You set a new record again today."

"I haven't reached the time that the instructor set yet."

"We're children. They're adults. It's not strange that we can't reach it. It's just a little frustrating that I can't beat Kiyotaka anymore."

Until a few weeks ago, Yuki was the fastest swimmer, regardless of how she swam.

"Once you passed me, the gap between our records has been widening. How can you swim so well? I've been practicing just as hard…"

"Breath-hold."

"What?"

"Your form is perfect when you're swimming, but it's when you take

a breath that your form is off. If you improve your form, you can improve your time a little more."

"Yes, I see… My instructor didn't point that out to me."

"Swimming instructors don't tell you everything. I think they make you aware that you have to find out for yourself."

It's not that I haven't noticed.

"You not only see yourself, but you're also even able to see your surroundings. I don't have that kind of luxury."

"I'm the same way, I'm just biting the bullet."

Many of them, especially those new to the curriculum, were falling behind.

Without the fundamentals, one would be too focused on memorizing to get results.

On the other hand, people like Yuki and Shiro often got good results the first time.

They were able to quickly grasp the basics even though they didn't know them.

I guess you could call it a sense. That was the difference.

But I didn't envy them.

It has been proven in many curricula that you can make up the difference by learning and consolidating the basics, regardless of the initial gap.

It was okay if you weren't good at first. The first step was to build the basics and learn to apply them to yourself.

Yuki stood still and didn't walk away. She kept looking at me.

"…Do you still need something?"

"Is it strange for me to speak with you without purpose?"

"Yeah, it's weird. Normally, you'd talk to me if you needed something."

"You're the same as always."

I didn't look at her and started to think about Yuki.

Recently, she had been talking more and more.

And she was speaking in a different way from herself originally.

She was talking to me more and more often even when she had nothing to say.

Why did she do such inefficient things?

She wasn't a bad subject for observation.

Besides, now I won't be reprimanded since there weren't any instructors watching and listening nearby.

Of course, we couldn't deny that we were being watched, but we weren't to be blamed for it.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes…"

Yuki, puzzled, didn't expect such a response back.

"How come you're so good at conversing?"

"What? How come I'm so good at talking? I don't know."

"You're at least better than me. I'm just not willing to speak."

"I'm not really motivated either, but… I'm just… I don't know…"

She didn't know what she was talking about, but she was willing to talk about it? That's what I didn't understand.

"Then how can you laugh? You laughed before."

"Why? …I don't know that either."

"Don't you get it? Even though you're changing it, you don't know?"

“Because I can’t laugh now.”

Sure, Yuki laughed before, but I don’t remember seeing her laugh since then.

Did she laugh only once by chance?

Are emotions formed by such coincidences?

“I don’t know, but I think I can laugh again when I’m around you, Kiyotaka.”

“I don’t understand.”

Was it possible that we can’t feel the emotion that creates laughter unless we were around a certain person?

No, maybe she had a point.

When the instructors showed their anger, most of it was directed at someone else.

Smiles are also directed to someone else.

It wasn’t hard to understand.

I looked at Yuki.

“…What?”

I tried to smile.

As I thought, I didn’t know how to smile.

I hadn’t even learned the basics of anger, sorrow, and joy.

Without the basics, you can’t do anything.

“Nothing.”

If we haven’t learned it, then we don’t need to feel it.

I had already stopped thinking about this.

7

Children are designed to forget most of their memories from their early childhood, such as when they're one or two years old.

This is called infantile amnesia.

The youngest memories that can be recalled in detail are usually those from around the age of three.

However, it isn't true that infants can't remember anything at all.

Some of them can remember details of their early childhood.

The only proof that this was true is that the child in front of my eyes remembers it well.

"…It's perfect."

For him, he was just looking back at his memories and putting them into words.

But that's something no ordinary human being could ever do.

An experiment with gummy bears at the age of two and the curriculum that followed.

Kiyotaka was selecting and storing the necessary memories.

I myself remember vividly dismissing it as a child's fantasy.

After listening to the past seven years of Kiyotaka's life, Tabuchi and the others in front of me were very excited.

"If you publish the results of this research, you will turn the conference upside down… Your child has achieved results that are on a different level from all the other children who have come before him."

"Tabuchi, I don't care if it's my child or not. Just tell me in a few words how great he is."

"Yes, sir. It has been proven that babies are capable of learning and remembering while they are still in their mother's womb. However, it was commonly believed that the ability to learn during infancy is very

unripe and unstable and that memories cannot be fixed. Or, memories are stored, but as they develop, they are buried in the depths and cannot be retrieved. It was thought to be one or the other. However, your son… No, Kiyotaka can retrieve them without difficulty."

"How does that make him superior?"

"For example… if we take only the three years between the ages of zero and three, we have a memory advantage of 1,095 days. Of course, it's not that simple, but the secret of his overwhelming learning ability is also related to this."

So, even if he started side by side with the other children, there was a big gap in ability at age three.

“He’s a genius, that’s for sure!”

It was the nature of a researcher to talk with a look of unquenchable excitement.

However, we cannot simply rejoice in this.

The White Room is meaningless if it’s just referred to as a single word like “genius.”

“Unfortunately, neither I nor Kiyotaka’s mother are very bright. In that sense, it isn’t directly related to heredity.

“But we can’t rule out the possibility that it’s a mutation, can we?”

“That’s… I agree. We don’t know everything about genes yet.”

“You know what? We’re not here to find geniuses from the moment they’re born. Remember, the goal is to make the best of even the poorest DNA.”

The fact that such an entity exists is a good thing in itself.

But I wished it wasn’t my child.

A third party would think that I had given my own child a special education.

It’s lamentable that most of my peer’s children, who went through the same curriculum, have turned out to be useless pieces of junk.

I gave the word and brought Kiyotaka back to the fourth generation.

I have plans to show Sakayanagi, who had been invited as a guest, the current state of the experiment.

“I have a suggestion on how to make use of his talent; how about making the non-fourth generations aware of his existence? Competition will help them to improve. It would be especially exciting for the kids who’re competing for first place in their respective terms.”

There’s certainly nothing wrong with having high ambitions. It’s not surprising that having a limited mindset while being in the top environment makes one’s room for growth doubtful.

Many researchers, including Ishida and his colleagues, agreed with

this opinion.

However, Suzukake voiced a negative opinion.

“Not a bad idea. I agree that it’s important to have a goal. But it’s meaningless if the goal is unattainable. That’s how big the gap is between Kiyotaka and the rest of the kids.”

“…You have a point.”

“It’s important to make them believe that they may be able to catch up with him even though they feel it’s a high goal. We should control the information we disclose and make him appear less capable than he really is. The top kids will still doubt his very existence, but you can show them evidence of his actual existence so that they can only understand through indirect scenes.”

So the rest of them will automatically continue to fight in a world of rivalry and non-communion.

“You can do whatever you want, but please don’t favor Kiyotaka and continue to educate the remaining fourth-generation students as you’ve always done.”

“Even if the number of dropouts continues to increase?”

“I don’t care even if Kiyotaka drops out. If we can see the results of our efforts, we can determine a line of defense in the event that more talented students are born in the future.”

We must not be satisfied with immediate results; we must instead aim for even greater heights.

If my son goes down in the process, he may be able to gain some sympathy from outside.

We’ll make our enthusiasm for this project known.

“The fourth-generation students are being given the Beta curriculum, but there’s some cause for concern. The end result of this rigorous education is that they will mentally mature too quickly.”

When Suzukake responded, Tabuchi immediately began to offer additional explanations.

“Perhaps by the time they reach the age of junior high and high school students, they may reach the mental age of 20… No, I’m afraid that by the time they reach the age of junior high and high school students, they may have reached the mental age of almost 30 years old. The gap between that and their ignorance of the world can, on the other hand, make them appear terribly juvenile.”

Too many extremes are also a problem.

“A different approach is required somewhere so that they can learn and grow of their own volition. But that would be a big gamble that could be changed by strong outside influences and could significantly lower the value of the work as an art form.”

Suzukake’s face, which has been at the forefront of the project up to this point, was hard and heavy.

That was how much he was worried about the possibilities that lie

ahead.

“Excuse me, sir, but Sakayanagi-sama has been taken to the observation room as scheduled. What shall I do now?”

It’s about time you came in…

“Let him stay for a while. And keep the curriculum you show him bland as planned. If you show him something too stimulating, he’ll reject it.”

I got up from my seat and walked to the observation room instead of immediately going to Sakayanagi.

I turned on the surveillance camera audio capturing the observation room. Basically, Sakayanagi is in a neutral position, but he could turn to the opposing side at any moment.

Although it's unlikely, we cannot rule out the possibility that he's here to scout the White Room.

First of all, let's see how probable the risk is.

Through the screen, I could see Sakayanagi and a girl who seemed to be his daughter in his arms.

Both of them seem to be watching the students in the White Room through the magic mirror.

"*Look at them, Arisu… These are the children who may one day carry the future of Japan.*"

It seems that it wasn't her father's idea to offer to give her a tour.

They were staring at the glass with their hands as if they were devouring it.

They never got tired of it, not even for five or ten minutes.

"*What's the matter, Arisu? It's unusual for you to be so interested.*"

"*It's an experiment to artificially create geniuses. I cannot help but be interested.*"

"*…An unchildlike remark, as per usual…*"

I didn't see any artificiality between the father and daughter.

"*I just think there are a lot of problems with this experiment.*"

"*What do you mean by that?*"

"*I mean, there are many humanitarian concerns to this experiment, and it's likely to be criticized from all sides.*"

"*Hahahaha…*"

I can't believe that she's a young child. She's so calm and has the same eyes and sensibility as an adult.

“I don’t believe it’s possible to artificially create a genius. Even if someone emerges from this facility, can we really say that it is the result of experimentation?”

I was going to go see him after I made some decisions, but I was interested in his daughter, Sakayanagi Arisu's point of view.

It wasn't every day you get to hear a child's assessment of the White Room.

"*What makes you think that?*"

"*Because I think that in the end, the kids who made it to the top were just the ones with the best DNA.*"

"*I see. It's true that the curriculum that these children are undergoing is very rigorous. It's possible that the kids who survive it are the ones who were good at it in the first place. You really are bright, just like her. And your personality is similar too.*"

"*I'm glad. For me to be compared to my mother is the highest compliment.*"

As she pointed out, it's difficult to pinpoint where the line between genius and mediocrity lies.

It's precisely the *genes* and *environment* that are essential in the human development process.

It's true that not all children who were given the 'White Room environment' were necessarily superior at the prenatal stage.

"*After all, some children survive the curriculum, but only because their parents are gifted.*"

Sakayanagi seemed genuinely puzzled by a question that even an adult couldn't immediately answer.

"*Well, I don't know. Maybe it's true, maybe it isn't. But I can't dismiss the possibility that the children here are destined for the future.*"

He explained, but his daughter didn't seem to be interested.

The girl was looking at the student in the White Room more intensely than before.

"*…That boy has been handling all the assignments calmly and effortlessly since a few minutes ago*"

"*Ah, he's sensei's son, isn't he? If I recall correctly, his name is… Ayanokōji… Kiyotaka-kun,*"

It seems that she has already noticed Kiyotaka's uniqueness.

"*If he's the son of sensei, he'd have good DNA, right?*"

"*I wonder. He didn't graduate from a great university nor was he an outstanding athlete, his wife was an average person, and neither of his grandparents were gifted, but he was more ambitious than anyone else, and he had an indomitable fighting spirit. That's why he became so great. So much so that at one point, he even tried to run a country*."

"*Then—isn't he the most suitable subject for this experiment?*"

"*I guess… He would be the ideal child. But … I can't help but feel sorry for him.*"

"*Why?*"

"*He's been in this institution since the moment he was born. The first thing he saw was not his mother or father, but this institution's white ceiling. If he'd dropped out early, he could've lived with sensei. Or maybe it's the fact that he's still here that keeps him in the sensei's favor… If so, it's very likely that the ultimate goal of this institution is to raise all the children they educate as geniuses. But right now, it's still in the experimental stage. It's a battle that will end up looking 50 to 100 years into the future. The children aren't here to showcase their talents when they grow up, but to live for the children of the future. Survivors and dropouts are all just a sampling.*"

"*Father, do you dislike this facility?*"

Arisu said what I would've liked to in order to get to the heart of the matter.

Depending on his response here, there were many things to consider…

"*…I wonder… I may not be able to support them honestly. What if the children raised here grow up to be better than anyone else? If this facility becomes the norm, I think that would only bring the beginnings of misfortune.*"

In particular, I couldn't see any connection with Kijima.

Only an answer typical of a good person like Sakayanagi keeps coming back.

"*Don't worry, I'll break it down for you… I will prove that the creation of a genius isn't determined by education but at the moment of birth.*"

"*I'm sure you're right. I'm counting on you Arisu.*"

Sakayanagi patted his daughter's head happily, apparently without having any ulterior motives.

"*By the way Father, I'm going to learn to play chess.*"

I turned off the camera and left the room.

"I guess there was no need to worry."

However, we must be cautious.

Now that the announcement time is approaching, you never know what might happen.

8

Again and again, I repeated the same day.

Repeated the days of learning that seemed to go on forever.

In a world where there were hardly any breaks, we fourth-generation students continued to repeat the curriculum.

There was nothing more to say.

No matter how complicated and difficult it got, what we had to do remained the same.

Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, the day after the day after that, and the day after that. Again and again, I repeated.

The next day came as a matter of fact.

We learned something new.

Absorb. If you didn't absorb, you wouldn't survive.

Once you were branded as a failure, there was no undoing it.

And what was normal yesterday may not be normal today.

The buzzer sounded.

The children followed the rules and placed their pens on their desks.

This was the end of the high-stakes written curriculum.

The test papers were collected and the scoring began immediately.

Meanwhile, the children sat silently in their seats and waited for the results.

However, the results were usually known before they were given out.

All the children who remained here knew how well they answered the questions.

The little girl in the front seat was shaking slightly.

I stared at her blankly, waiting for the right moment.

One of the instructors came in and walked over to the shaking child.

“—Disqualified.”

The instructor announced in front of the child… in the same calm tone as usual.

Once again, another student had been disqualified.

The number of remaining fourth-generation students had been reduced to only four, and now one of those seats disappeared.

“Oh no…”

In the White Room, failure in the training and study phases was never an issue.

> It didn’t matter how much you progressed leading up to the exam, scoring a

ten or a five on the other exams was irrelevant. The instructor would just keep the learning process going without stopping.

It was the final exam that decided everything—whether or not you failed.

If you failed to meet the standards, you'd be judged as having no ability at that point and dropped from the curriculum.

"Stand up."

No extra words were included, short phrases were all that mattered.

"I… I don't want to…"

The last thing you'll want to do would be to answer that demand.

If what she said was correct, Yuki's result was only five points short of the passing grade.

To the casual observer, it may seem like only five points, but in the White Room, there was no redemption even if one point was missing.

This was true for many students I have trained against.

Children who failed to meet the passing grade once were generally less capable of learning later in life.

This has been proven. In other words, even if we ignore the situation here and let it go until the next regular exam, they still won't be able to break out of the situation where they're the next top candidate to drop out of the White Room.

In other words, you aren't qualified to remain in the fourth generation once you see that you've hit your ceiling.

"Rotten apples must be removed. Any hindrance will become a burden to our growth."

I guess they didn't intend to spend any more time on this.

One of the instructors reached for Yuki's arm.

"No… I hate it!"

Brushing away his arm, Yuki rushed towards me while still shaken.

"Kiyotaka, save me! I don't want to disappear!"

Spilling tears, Yuki pleaded for help.

I took one look at the instructor who slowly approached me, but I didn't change my indifferent position.

"It's impossible."

"…!"

"I can't help you. No, I'm not going to."

"Please! Next time I'll do my best! Next time!"

"Next? Why didn't you try before that? You know there's no next time."

"Well, that's…!"

If you can't work hard now, you won't be able to work hard next time.

Continuing was impossible, just as there's only one life.

"But still… I can do it, I can do it…!"

Look at what I've achieved up until now. Is that what this is about?

The instructors had me and Yuki surrounded.

“Huuh?”

I signaled to the approaching instructors to stop and turned to Yuki.

“It’s true that you’ve been following the curriculum except for the written exam. However, your grades kept dropping year after year and never seemed to improve. In other words, this is where your limits lie.”

Even if she were to be saved and remained, it would be the instructor’s decision, not the decision of the kid that wants to be saved. I could only assume that Yuki was making a mistake by hanging onto me like this.

“Come here!”

“No! No! Please! Please let me try again!”

Raising her voice, Yuki showed a peculiar resistance to the instructors.

It wasn’t an unusual behavior among the dropouts, but even so, Yuki’s behavior was a little different from what we had seen before.

“You know very well the rules of the White Room. Why are you so upset?”

The students in the White Room, including myself, didn’t

understand the situation.

The instructors, however, knew very well why Yuki was resisting so much.

But they never stated the reason.

They grabbed Yuki by the arms and forcefully pulled her off of me.

“Help me! Kiyotaka!”

She called out my name over and over again, screaming and begging for help.

“Help! Help…!”

She reached out to me as she crumbled to the ground, begging for my help.

Help?

The girl in front of me had already been disqualified.

The disqualified will leave this room.

And they never come back.

There were no exceptions.

Then why did she need to ask for help?

It was a waste of effort—a waste of time.

“Please, I don’t want to leave!”

Two adults, who couldn’t stand that she still hadn’t left the room, came into the room in a hurry.

The instructors then seized the girl and dragged her out.

“No! No! No! Help me!”

One more person failed to reach their goal and was eliminated.

I’m sure the remaining children were looking at Yuki with the same cold eyes I did.

Or maybe they were scared that they might be next.

Either way.

All I cared about was that I was the last one standing.

From the beginning, I've been living in this world relying on those feelings alone.

I lived in that white world. A scream that comes from learning together for years, like family, or perhaps something from a different dimension entirely, like affection towards the opposite sex, huh?

To be dragged out of here is a denial of all that we are.

Therefore, everyone repeated their studies within a limited time so that this didn't happen.

It's just…

"Please wait."

I muttered quietly to the instructors.

“Who said you could speak? You won’t get away with it the next time you open your mouth without permission.”

“Then it’s fine if you don’t let me get away with it, but please listen to me”

Immediately after those words came out, the instructor fell silent, came up to me, and kicked me without hesitation.

“I didn’t give you permission to speak.”

“Yuki wasn’t feeling well before noon. She seemed restless during the exam, and I think she was unable to show her ability in other areas…”

As I was about to continue, he grabbed me by the chest as if to further interrupt me.

“It is also her responsibility to keep herself in good condition. Do you think that’s an excuse now? I didn’t see anything wrong with her this morning.”

“That’s right. But it would be a different story if it was unexpected.”

“Unexpected?”

The instructor turned around and looked at the other instructors surrounding the fallen Yuki.

“…There’s bleeding.”

The adults seemed to realize from their observations that Yuki was in an unusual state.

“Bleeding? Did she get hurt somewhere…No, is it *that*?”

“Yes. Normally, the earliest that this could occur is around 9 years old, but this early is exceptional. It’s probably due to the stress, which is different from that of the other students in the class, caused by the difficulty of the course. She also seems to have a fever, so it’s no wonder that she’s unexpectedly ill.”

“Go to the doctor’s office. We’ll see if she’s disqualified or not after we get a closer look at her.”

With those words, the instructor instructed Yuki and took her out of

the room.

As they were leaving, Yuki looked at me through her tears, but I didn't meet her eyes.

"Well spotted. That's what I would say, but we would've noticed it right after this without you having to point it out. Your unauthorized comments are still a problem."

"So you'll punish me?"

Punishments, such as corporal punishment, would follow after violating rules outside the curriculum.

But that was all there was to it.

I knew that they couldn't take such brutal measures, such as dropping out.

"Do you think I'm joking?"

“If you’re going to stand by and keep an eye on me, you’d better watch me more closely.”

“…You!”

Too late. The instructor, clenching his right fist and revealing his murderous intent, came at me, but I avoided him.

“Stop!”

The instructor tried to retort, but another instructor rushed back to stop him.

“Don’t let the kid’s comments get to you, newcomer!”

“…!”

There were some instructors who were inexperienced, but with this new instructor, he will make more mistakes from now on.”

That’s why there’s a need to make it wide-known at this stage.

If they were going to use him, they needed to train him better. If they decided that he was useless, they needed to get rid of him.

In the end, after that day, Yuki never came back.

9

More fourth-generation students disappeared, and only two were left in the room. Me and Shiro.

It had been several months since the two of us were the last ones alone.

We never spoke to each other once during that time, and every day was just silence.

But I didn't mind. I even thought it was better.

With Yuki's chatter gone, I was able to focus more on my own learning.

That day was the first judo lesson in a few days.

Due to the heightened curriculum, certain events are only offered once every few days.

Still, both Shiro and I were improving our skills. Even though the competitions were different, our training allowed us to become familiar with our skills and we could apply them to many martial arts.

"You two are going to continue with your usual sparring sessions. I'll be out of the room for a bit."

The instructor who was acting as the referee left the room in a hurry as if he'd been summoned.

We were left behind and started our Randori as instructed. We clutched each other's judogi.

Shiro and I had done the same thing dozens and hundreds of times.

"Can I have a word?"

The past months' silence was broken when Shiro whispered in my ear.

I thought it was a mental attack, but he stopped moving completely.

"It's been many, many years since I've last beaten you in Judo, hasn't it?"

“That’s right.”

I had been winning since the second round after I lost my first fight.

“Boxing, Karate, Jeet Kune Do—it’s the same for everything. I’ll win the first one or two fights, but once you turn the tables on me, I can’t do anything about it. You’re really great.”

Why would he say that in the middle of a brawl like this?

“I have one thing to say to you.”

“…What?”

I listened to the mumbling, which continued at such a close distance that the adults couldn’t pick it up.

“I’ve decided to leave this facility.”

“Only the outcasts get out of here.”

“So I’m going to drop out and get out of here. If you look at the dropouts’ tendencies and the adults who have to deal with them, you can imagine what kind of paths they take. At least I won’t be killed.”

“What are you going to do out there? Is there a point to that?”

“Yes. I want freedom.”

“Freedom?”

“I want to be free. I want to have friends. Isn’t it normal to feel that way? Look around you. It’s just me and you. We’re going to be like this for over ten years.”

I didn’t understand what Shiro meant.

Why would he want that?

“Don’t you care about the outside world? Or are you able to withstand this pain in the first place?”

I had never had any such interest or doubts.

“One-sided knowledge and this small space—are you satisfied with that?”

“At least I’m not complaining.”

I’m definitely growing every day in the White Room.

Didn’t he want to know how far he could grow and what his limits were?

You can’t get this kind of education in the outside world. This means that you will lose efficiency in self-improvement.

“…You’re weird. I want to see the real world, not the virtual one.”

Objectively speaking, I had seen many children who were sick and tired of their constrained lives, but the idea of dropping out because I couldn’t take it anymore never came to me.

“I was convinced when Yuki dropped out. I even envied her.”

“I see.”

If that was the answer Shiro gave, then I had nothing to say.

“I thought you were just like me. I thought you’d want to be out in the world someday.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never thought that.”

“…I see. I was going to ask you to leave with me…”

I was sure the adults watching over him didn’t know this as well as I did.

They didn’t know that Shiro had such an enormous amount of feelings about this place.

There was this established notion between the administrators that the children couldn’t know what we didn’t tell them. But the reality was that there were other people, like the one in front of me, who desired to leave the White Room as soon as possible.

I didn’t know if this discovery meant anything as long as I was the last one standing.

“I’m going to go ahead and see you again sometime, Kiyotaka.”

I didn’t reply to his words.

I only felt his extraordinary determination. I also sensed a determination that I had never felt before, a determination to defeat me in this battle. The opponent in front of me wasn’t an easy opponent compared to a half-baked adult. And yet…

“KUK!”

Shiro’s attack was repelled, and I got a clean blow.

I couldn’t lose to an opponent who had learned from the same mistakes I had made.

If he exerted a power of 120, I exerted 130.

If he exerted 140, I exerted 150.

I don’t care about the comfort of the White Room or the freedom outside.

The important thing was that there was still much to learn here.

As long as I could improve myself, I shouldn’t avoid it.

In other words, my intellectual curiosity was telling me to stay in this White Room.

“That’s it!”

Even though there was no judge nearby, we were always being watched from another room on the second floor, behind the glass.

Shiro slammed the ball down on the tatami mat, and we were informed that the game had been decided.

“I lost again after all. I should’ve remembered from when I won.”

He rested his arm on his forehead, breathless, and spoke of his faded memories.

“It was five years of losing all the time. I guess I realized that I couldn’t win if I stayed here ..”

“Are you really going to drop out?”

“Yeah. I’ll leave the White Room when the time is right.”

He wasn’t going to change his mind.

I didn’t understand. To leave the White Room was to die, no matter what form it took.

I couldn’t think like that.

But Shiro must have had his own thoughts.

If he wanted to kill himself, I wouldn’t stop him.

“Goodbye, Shiro.”

“Goodbye, Kiyotaka.”

This was the last conversation between Shiro and me.

10

Not long after that, Shiro dropped out. The only other student was gone.

From this point on, my memory became more monotonous.

There was no one to really talk to. Some days, depending on the curriculum, other than to shovel food down my throat, I really didn't open my mouth.

But even after being alone, what I did hadn't changed.

If anything had changed, it was the general martial arts.

Up until now, I had been competing with the same White Room students, but now that they were no longer with me, all of my opponents became adults.

By the time I turned nine years old, I had defeated all the instructors who had taught me everything I knew about martial arts.

That was probably why the instructors were in a hurry to gather up in the room.

"Kiyotaka, you are now going to fight several people in a real battle. This is the culmination of everything you've learned so far. You are permitted to use any means necessary."

"Yes."

"Also, don't hold back at all. You can do it with the intention to kill them."

"Does that mean I can actually kill them?"

"Unless we stop you, you can take us at our word. Be very careful."

"Yes."

I was in a large training room and a group of adults in suits walked in.

I had never seen them before.

When they saw me, they made silly faces and started laughing.

“I thought it was a joke when they said we’re really supposed to fight this kid seriously.”

They were clearly different from the adults I had seen teaching fighting techniques.

Their movements weren’t fluid, but rough and spirited.

These were opponents who were capable of irregular fights in an uphill battle rather than an even playing field.

Unlike previously, pure physical strength was no match for them. The difference in muscle mass is obvious.

They were the kind of guys that, in a head-on fight, you’d have no chance of winning 100 out of 100 times against.

“Yes, it’s ridiculous, but don’t cut corners. We’re talking about people paying that kind of money just to subdue one kid. You’d think they’d have unusual skills.”

It was one of the men who seemed to have some standing among the men that spoke.

“Listen, come at us with the intention of killing us. No, try to kill us. With that much spirit and determination, if you don’t come at me with a general idea of what to do, I’d be a little heartbroken beating you up.”

The man who seemed to be the leader of the group instructed me to do so.

I was going to do it. I already had my orders.

“We’ll give you some weapons if you need them.”

He said and placed his shoes on the ground.

The sound of metal scraping against metal echoed off the floor.

“I don’t need it.”

“…You want to do it with your bare hands?”

“Yes.”

“You’re probably not joking around but… I’m serious too. Just pick one.”

“Sir, is that an order?”

I turned to the instructor, who was looking down at me from upstairs and asked for orders.

“That’s an order. Do as the man says. I’m sure you should’ve been taught how to use all of them already.”

Then I’ll just obey.

I looked in the bag.

“Baton, stun gun, knife—whatever you want.”

Sure enough, I had seen them, held them, and learned how to use them in past courses.

For simple killing power, I’d go for the knife, but I wanted more

reach.

“I’ll take this one.”

Without hesitation, I reached for the baton and grabbed it.

The baton was about 30 centimeters long.

“Do you know how to use it?”

“You swing it and it grows to about 80 centimeters. You hit with it, right?”

“That’s right.”

In order to win, I must accurately hit the weak points of the human body.

He had probably never fought a fighter of my stature before.

I needed to take advantage of the fact that I was small and short, making it difficult to face me.

After a few minutes, when the last adult fell down with his leg smashed by the baton, I raised it. I struck him on the skull and knocked him unconscious with one blow.

If that didn’t work, I would’ve just delivered a second blow that would shatter his skull.

“Stop! Stop!”

I heard a voice echoing through the room, and I stopped moving and threw the baton lightly into the distance.

Adults rushed into the room and helped the fallen adults up.

“Oh my god… We’ve got to get him to the infirmary right away!”

The medical team, who had seen his condition and realized that he was seriously injured, carried him out on a stretcher.

“What the hell were you doing, Kiyotaka?”

“I was ordered to kill him.”

To be sure, I even asked again to confirm if it was really alright.

“What’s the problem with that?”

The instructors were stunned by the situation, but soon after, the door to the room opened.

“Ayanokōji-sensei!”

“You guys take care of these guys. I’d like to have a meeting with Kiyotaka. Follow me.”

Orders were absolute.

I followed him without a second thought.

Usually, there were several instructors by my side, but today it seemed to be just one.

“As I’m sure you’re aware by now, I’m in charge of the White Room and I’m your father.”

“I know who you are.”

“I’ve never claimed to be your father, but when did you ever learn that?”

“I remember from when I was four years old… when I overheard you talking with the instructors.”

“I see. You’re a fourth-generation student and you continued to dominate. And the next thing you know, you’re the only one left, just silently perfecting the curriculum… No, you continue to exceed it.”

To me, the existence of a father was nothing special.

It was just a fact. Nothing more, nothing less.

“You are special to me.”

“…”

“The White Room has only been in operation for a short period of time, about 14 or 15 years, but even so, I don’t see a vision of a genius like you being born in the next few years or so. Of course, with each successive term, they are steadily reducing their shortcomings and overcoming their problems one step at a time…”

It seemed certain that I was being praised.

Just like the talk about being my father, these were simply facts.

“You can go back now.”

“Excuse me.”

What was the meaning of that conversation?

Perhaps it had something to do with the device attached to my arm.

As if to confirm this, the man said.

“How did it go?”

“During the fight and during the conversation with Ayanokōji-sensei, there was not even the slightest disturbance in Kiyotaka’s pulse.”

“His heartbeat was untouched even though I said he was special, or… No, I think it’s safe to say that his human emotions have completely stopped functioning.

“It’s both a strength and an indelible weakness for Kiyotaka.”

“Ishida is right. Emotions are a low priority, but they’re still essential. Even half of what’s left in an average person is enough, but in Kiyotaka’s case, there’s almost none. He’s suitable and unsuitable at the same time to be an educator, politician, or any other use.”

The two talked about various things in front of me, without hiding anything.

I wondered if this was part of the curriculum.

It didn’t matter what was praised and what was criticized.

All that mattered was whether I dropped out or not.

“It’s probably impossible for him to learn to feel emotions in the White Room environment, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but he can use lies to his advantage when necessary. He may not have a lot of emotion, but he’s mastered the art of pretending to be something he’s not.”

“That’s the problem. It’s too late for him to learn to express his emotions now in the White Room. Then we have no choice but to drastically change the environment.”

“…I don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand?”

“We’ve educated many children from the first generation to the thirteenth generation that’s currently in progress. The difficulty level of the curriculum has been very different, but clearly, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka is different. This isn’t because he’s the son of Ayanokōji-sensei, but because he’s an anomaly.

“Indeed, that’s true. No matter how harsh the environment is, Kiyotaka showed adaptability sooner or later. Every child has a plateau, but why is Kiyotaka the only one who doesn’t have one? Why is it that the more you teach him, the more he absorbs everything as if he were swallowing it all?”

“I don’t know… It’s easy to say that it’s a genetic inheritance, but the White Room will never be truly complete without a thorough investigation of what’s going on.”

“If I can get a steady supply of people who are as good or better than this kid, my ideal will be realized. Figure it out. Don’t give up on the idea until you understand it. That’s what you’re being paid for.”

I continued my education. What awaited me at the end of it all and what laid beyond the quest for knowledge.

That was all I wanted to know.

Chapter 6:

Hopelessness and a Way of Life

TOKYO WAS UNUSUALLY hit by heavy snowfall.

The garden seen from the corridor window was lit up with a scenery of a snowy night.

Kamogawa and I were light on our feet and headed for the appointed location ahead of the others.

On the way, Kamogawa stopped and looked at the snowy landscape.

“Do you remember? More than ten years ago, when we were waiting for Naoe-sensei under the cold weather.”

“Yes, it seems like it was only a few days ago.”

“That day, Ayanokōji-san took charge of the White Room Project and appointed me as well. It’s been a lot of hard work, but we’ve made it this far.”

That’s true. There are more than one or two secrets that you can’t tell people and must take to your grave.

“You have grown up a lot. I see you’ve learned the rudiments of politics.”

“Thank you, Naoe-sensei, Ayanokōji-san… No, working under Ayanokōji-sensei has been a great step forward for me. The only thing I regret is not being able to report to my father, who passed away last year…”

Kamogawa’s father passed away around this time last year after suffering a heart attack.

It had been Kamogawa’s goal to tell him directly about the White Room Project’s release.

The state should provide institutions that take in and nurture children.

The Advanced Nurturing High School is a pioneer now, but it will go further than that.

An institution that saves the lives of unborn children.

An institution that educates children and produces geniuses.

The White Room Project is what the world will absolutely need in the future.

Lives thrown down the toilet. Lives cut off by abortion. Lives killed by abandonment.

Under the leadership of the government, we will eliminate all of these problems.

It's a plan that will also help to address the problem of declining birthrates.

"We're going to achieve results that will reach the heavens. Don't be satisfied now, Kamogawa."

"Yes, sir."

Today was a special day. Things were different from the time when we were waiting for Naoe-sensei in the cold.

The White Room experiment had been steadily producing results, despite its many twists and turns.

Finally, it was the day I would report to Naoe-sensei in detail and go out on the stage.

The first step toward seeing the light of day was about to begin.

This was something that couldn't have been done without a lot of hard work and perseverance.

We were supposed to take our seats first and wait for Naoe-sensei to appear in the upper section.

I knew it was polite to wait outside, but this was Naoe-sensei's order. In other words, I interpreted it as a sign of appreciation for my hard work.

"With this project's announcement, Naoe-sensei finally stands at the top of the country."

"Prime minister, huh…?"

He was now fully prepared for the forthcoming election.

"He won't just be the prime minister. Not only will he be honored on the front page, but he'll be one or two times more powerful than the previous prime ministers."

In the truest sense of the word, he will be the man at the top of this country.

I'm rarely nervous, but I could feel my heartbeat speeding up slightly.

I put my political life on the line for this project.

I dreamed over and over again of the day when it would pay off.

"Naoe-sensei is here."

After a long, yet short 30 minutes, the news of Naoe-sensei's arrival came.

“You arrived earlier than I expected.”

He was only ten minutes late from the appointed time.

I had planned to wait an hour or two without worrying about him being late, but I was surprised.

“Is that how interested Naoe-sensei is in you?”

I lightly warned Kamogawa as he happily spoke.

From that point on, we put aside our loose feelings and began a serious discussion with Naoe-sensei.

Before the shoji was opened, we sat on our knees and bowed our heads, rubbing our foreheads against the ground.

I heard Naoe-sensei’s dignified, quiet footsteps.

“I’m sorry for keeping you waiting.”

Naoe-sensei appeared and apologized for his tardiness.

I couldn't help but feel a strange tugging at my insides when he said those words.

"No, sir, of course not. Thank you for coming all the way here today in the cold."

As I said this, I shook the unnecessary thoughts out of my head.

I shouldn't worry about it.

I was definitely on my way up the stairs to fulfill my ambitions.

"Just raise your head. We're not getting anywhere."

"Yes—"

Kamogawa and I raised our heads and quickly reached for our glasses to pour Naoe-sensei a beer.

But Naoe-sensei stopped us.

"Before you do that, I need to talk to you," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

Kamogawa quickly stepped aside and returned to listening to what Sensei had to say.

"I have a few things to tell you. Well, let's start with that."

After a slight pause, Naoe-sensei muttered as if remembering something he forgot.

"As for the next election, I've decided not to run."

"…Huh?"

For a moment, I didn't understand what Naoe-sensei said, and for the first time, I gave a dumb reply.

I guess it was the same for Kamogawa who was sat next to me.

The ringing in my ears was intense in the silence.

"Sensei… That's some kind of a joke, isn't it?"

The words came out naturally from Kamogawa's mouth rather than

as a confirmation.

I would've said the same thing even if he hadn't taken the liberty of saying it.

"It's true. The day after tomorrow, when the candidates will be announced, I will vote for Kijima."

Kijima? Why is Naoe-sensei choosing Kijima-sensei?

No matter how promising he was, Naoe-sensei was in a better position than Kijima-sensei.

"Wait a minute. You've made a lot of preparations for this moment —!"

As I leaned forward, I couldn't hold back my emotions.

I knew that becoming the prime minister wasn't everything.

In fact, the Naoe-sensei that was in front of me had his chances in the past, but he remained a fixer in the shadows for many years without sticking to his post.

Still, it was a foregone conclusion that he would be the prime minister this time around.

In fact, if he didn't run for the prime minister's office… He would be practically giving up his prime minister's seat.

Once Kijima-sensei takes over the position, he would surely hold on to it.

Naoe-sensei's faction would start to lose its cohesive power and he would never have the opportunity to become prime minister again.

Considering the fact that he had withdrawn his position, one can't help but think that something bad had happened.

And that could have a huge impact on the White Room.

I had to check because I knew instinctively.

What surprised me the most was that it was Kijima-sensei that Naoe-sensei decided to support.

"Oh, that Kijima-sensei… You're a clear adversary of his… Right?"

Kamogawa couldn't help but mention the name.

The number of candidates from the Citizen's Party for the election had been narrowed down to three, both inside and outside the government and in the media. The main candidate was Naoe-sensei, who was right in front of me, and the runners-up were Isomaru-sensei, his rival, and Kijima-sensei, who came a little later. These three were the only candidates who had the ticket to become the prime minister, and Naoe-sensei was definitely the first candidate.

"I had no intention of making him prime minister, but that's no longer the case," he said.

"You think you won't be able to get votes…?"

"That's how it is. The votes for me, Isomaru, and Kijima were nicely divided among the Citizens Party, but now it seems that some of the opposition parties have decided to destroy me. I've calculated that I won't even get 20 to 30 votes."

After trying all the strategies, Naoe-sensei had a resigned smile on his face.

“Even if I do well, if I fail, I’ll lose a lot of my appeal. If that’s the case, I’ll have no choice but to support him instead of running for office while protecting my current position, right? He’s still young, but he has momentum and power. I thoroughly fumbled around for scandals, but not a single speck of dust has turned up…”

A politician with no women, no money, and nothing to hide.

He was capable of utilizing his abilities just as he had always been doing.

“But in that case, wouldn’t it be better to recommend Isomaru-sensei? He may be a rival within the same party, but he must also be an old acquaintance. I don’t think there’s any need to recommend Kijima-sensei, who’s difficult to handle…”

He would not be thinking so childishly that he doesn't want to let his colleagues have credit where credit is due.

If he decided that it was right for him to be under Isomaru-sensei, there would be no need to hesitate.

"You already know that it's better to be under Kijima, don't you? If we try to force our way onto Isomaru's ship, there's a strong possibility that we'll fall together. There are many voices from our faction saying that Kijima is the best choice between the two."

Even Naoe-sensei was afraid of defection if he tried to force his way into Isomaru-sensei's side.

I had no idea that he had been pushed to this point.

I thought I had been in on the political scene, but it seems that even I hadn't been exposed to the other side of the story.

"Oh, it's too early to give up, Naoe-sensei. We have the White Room Project!"

"Stop it, Kamogawa."

Kamogawa tried to talk back, but I strongly restrained him.

"If you've made that decision, then we will abide by it. But you know that the White Room Project is a different matter, don't you?"

Naoe-sensei's support for Kijima-sensei was promised, of course. In other words, it should be a given that he would receive almost the same post as before. We could safely conclude that it wouldn't have that much of an impact.

However…

"That's what I came to see you about today. I'm sorry for all the work you've done for me over the years, but I'm going to have to ask you to stay quiet for a while."

He spoke what I least wanted to hear, and my cold sweat began to pour out of me.

"…What do you mean, Naoe-sensei?"

Even though I was beginning to understand the situation, I couldn't

admit it.

“You know what I mean. I know what you’re going to say, but all of that will only happen if I can maintain my position. You understand that, don’t you?”

“…Of course.”

“Sure, I’ve been unofficially promised my next post. But that’s not a fort that’s been won. It is the last stronghold that I defended in the face of defeat in the factional war. We can’t promote the White Room Project, which has the potential to generate controversy here.”

If Naoe-sensei were to make a bad move, Kijima-sensei’s side won’t remain silent.

It was obvious that we would be suspected of trying to gain more centrality by taking the credit. The logic is quite understandable.

“Ayanokōji. you are an excellent man.”

“…Thank you very much.”

“You know very well that I don’t judge you only by your educational background since I picked you up from the ‘have-nots.’”

“In the world of politics, both now and in the past, a specific level of academic background is required, and if it weren’t for your way of thinking, you wouldn’t have used a man like me.”

Naoe-sensei nodded and took a breath.

“For better or worse, people who have been in politics for a long time are all copycats who imitate what the people around them do; they’re incompetent people with only their academic backgrounds to them. They come to think that it’s enough to maintain the politician title and a high income. Politicians who aspire to be righteous or aim to be villains are equally engulfed.”

Naoe-sensei reached for his empty glass but quickly withdrew his hand.

“But Kijima has never changed. He’s serious about politics.”

I wondered if Naoe-sensei had ever praised his opponent in such a straightforward way.

He was no longer thinking about the battle after it was over.

“I feel the same way about you. You are the same, just in a different way.”

“…Yes. My beliefs and principles will never change.”

“To be the best in the country… That’s your goal, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I have no doubts. But that would mean we have to beat Kijima. He’s a real piece of work, isn’t he?”

“He is. He’s got ambition. But if Naoe-sensei supports Kijima-sensei,

let me follow suit. From now on, for the sake of Naoe-sensei and Kijima-sensei—”

“—As I said before, you’d better lay low for a while.”

Oh, Is that so?

I had a bad feeling about this.

I guess it turned out to be true.

“…I don’t understand.”

“You’ve become an eyesore for Kijima. He’s heard about all the fancy things you’ve been doing with the business community over the past few years. Do you understand? I can’t have a guy like that working for me.”

“That’s just what you told me to do. To build a facility beyond the high school, to change this country… Didn’t you tell us to do it thoroughly?”

Naoe-sensei’s face changed.

“You’ve been running the White Room enough and amassed quite a bit of money. You’ve got deep connections to the Yakuza and you’re becoming more than just a politician. Ah, aren’t I right?. Did I tell you to go that far? You’ve been going around doing all that fuss to protect yourself. Do you know how many times I’ve had to put out fires behind the scenes over the last few years?”

His tone of voice changed, and before I knew it, strong reprimands began to fly.

“So… What are you going to do about the White Room Project?

“It’s a done deal. That’s a blank piece of paper.”

“You can’t tell me that… It’s a blank piece of paper…”

Kamogawa’s expression, which had still been half-joyful earlier, had turned to one of despair.

I remained as firm as a Buddha statue, but there was no denying that I still had a grim look on my face.

The White Room Project—a blank sheet of paper?

Did he know how much effort I put into the project?

I couldn’t let that be reduced to a single phrase: a blank paper.

…No, it had always been that way.

With a single word from Naoe-sensei, any case could be moved to the right or to the left.

There was nothing special about it.

If we showed any kind of defiance here, we would only offend Naoe-sensei.

He was disrespectful to us young people, and that was why he came up to us like this.

If we didn’t act maturely and calmly, we would be caught flat-footed.

If you were kicked out for being a cocky guy, you would never get a chance to be useful again.

I had enough money to be the envy of others.

Even if Naoe-sensei discarded me, it was possible that I wouldn't encounter any issues living my life.

But as a politician… I could never make a comeback.

Then my ambition won't be realized.

"That's the way it is. No hard feelings."

So this is how it all ends.

Naoe-sensei seemingly has no intention of taking his time eating here.

So at last, I didn't care to even hold my glass.

"When Kijima acknowledges that you don't have fangs, I'll bring you forward again. It's all right."

To survive as a politician.

Throw out the White Room and start over.

It was my only choice.

I know.

I know.

I know—.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

This time, I couldn’t be as calm and smart as I usually am.

I couldn’t have done that.

Did he know how hard I worked for this project?

More than a decade of hard work in order to make it a reality just to end up giving up everything?

I won’t let it all go to waste.

“The White Room has received a lot of funding and is still operating. There’s no way we can withdraw it now.”

“Oh? Who are you talking to, Ayanokōji?”

He was so overbearing that it was hard to believe that he was just an old man.

He was neither intimidated nor offended by my bluster, but simply turned his dark eyes on me.

For Naoe, who had been in politics for decades, this kind of thing was a common occurrence.

But it would be the same if I pulled out now.

Now that I had drawn my bow, there was no backing out.

“I told you to go back to the drawing board. Bow down and writhe to undo your mistakes. If you can’t do that, hang yourself.”

“You’re telling me this now?”

“What the hell do you expect me to say?”

“I’m not convinced.”

“I don’t care if you agree with me or not, I said I’m calling it off.”

“Then what about me? I’ve only ever been under your tutelage, and I’ve given up many benefits for this project. Even if I get to keep my title as a politician, it’s useless if I can’t do anything.”

“You have to be patient for a few years. When it’s over, I’ll move you on to the next job.”

Could I believe that?

I couldn’t believe it.

“Under your directions, I have been working solely on this project… This… I can’t allow this absurdity to continue…!”

I could only mourn.

I couldn’t help but lament.

“I know how you feel. But you know better. That’s the way this world works. And I’ve given you my full backing. I helped you get reelected so that you could move forward with your project. That’s how you got reelected with the least amount of effort. Isn’t that right?”

It was true that I entrusted Naoe-sensei with all of the campaigning that would normally be required.

And I owed him a debt of gratitude for getting me elected.

But if he overturned the tables at this point, that favor alone wouldn’t be enough.

“I am grateful for that. But—”

“If you get too attached to one project, you’ll lose your footing.”

Why was I hanging on so tightly?

Perhaps Kamogawa, who was shrinking next to me, had no idea.

It wasn’t that I hated the fact that the White Room Project was going to fail, or that I was still obsessed with it. It was because I knew what the future held.

For Naoe-sensei, “I” turned into something to be discarded.

He said he’d give me another chance and leave me with nothing to do until the time of the election, but when the election comes, he’ll throw me out without any support.

How many times have I seen politicians cut in front of my eyes in the same way?

In other words, my fate as a politician was sealed as soon as the White Room was presented as a blank piece of paper.

My instinct was to resist at least until the end, and I chose to fight.

“So I’m the only one who has to cover my tracks… You mean to say I’m the only one who can get muddled?”

“You’re still young. Unlike me, you’ll get many more chances. But for me, it’s now or never. I can’t back down now. I’m going to die a politician.”

“Sensei…”

“I’m not asking you to quit politics. I’m just asking you to be quiet.”

“You’re not going to cut me off, are you?”

“Of course not. I won’t harm you. Kijima was very harsh with you, but he seemed to think highly of you, too. If you keep quiet for a while, your time will come. I’ll ask you to show me what you can do then.”

I guess it’s all over…

“—I understand.”

“Okay, that’s good.”

“You’re right, the White Room Project is over with. I will start working on the cleanup tomorrow.”

I bowed deeply.

“Thank you for your cooperation.”

The Naoe-sensei that was in front of me had already lost all interest in me.

Whether I was capable or not was irrelevant. He just won’t take advantage of me anymore. I was cut off in conjunction with the project.

1

“…Damn.”

In the room where Naoe had disappeared from, only Kamogawa was left in tears and the food was cold.

“Don’t joke with me—!”

I shouted out my unexplained thoughts.

“You’re going to give me a hand one of these days, huh? Don’t make me laugh…”

Once you drop out of politics, it’s all over.

Once you try to make a comeback, you’ll be crushed.

“What’s going to happen to us now? …Is this the end of everything? I don’t know…”

Should I have punched him first…?

No, it would’ve meant nothing to me if I had punched Naoe right there and then and enjoyed the momentary pleasure of it.

I would be locked up immediately and lose not only my political identity, but everything I’ve ever done.

In a quarrel between children, it was enough to show one’s strength by punching each other.

But in this world, arm strength is only one of many weapons, and they’re weak at that.

Naoe, who appeared to be nothing more than an old man, had a myriad of weapons.

“Don’t think you can get away with using them all conveniently, Naoe…”

I slammed my fist down on the tatami mat with all the force I could muster and let out my frustration.

In the end, I was just used and discarded.

In the world of politics, once you fall down, it's hopeless to get up. The stakes are high, and that's the end of it.

"I'm finished?"

Even if I put it into words, I would never feel the reality of it.

Did he have any idea how much I've suffered in order to change this country—to rise to the top of this country? How much humiliation, ostracism, and contempt I had suffered?

The man was no longer of any use to me.

But if I tried to make a new move, I'd be crushed.

Naoe and I were two sides of the same coin. If you destroy him on the front end, you automatically destroy me on the other side. Until he retires or even dies, I was completely blocked from coming back.

Then… If he dies, it meant I'd have a chance to get moving again.

Should I call Ohba and have him take care of Naoe?

"I'm an idiot…"

If I make such a request, Ohba would just cut me off.

I don't even need to think about which side would benefit him more.

"Kamogawa… you'll have to start all over again tomorrow."

"That's… That's the only way… What are you going to do, Ayanokōji-sensei? You're not going to ignore Naoe-sensei's order, are you?"

"…I'm finished anyway. Stopping my resistance now won't change the way I'm treated. I'll quit politics and continue to run the White Room."

"Wait a minute! I respect you, Ayanokōji-sensei! I think you'll surpass Naoe-sensei one day, someday! Please don't tell me you're quitting!"

"This is the course of action. I can't overturn it by my own will. But you can still survive. You still have your father's influence. Continue to fight under Naoe as a politician."

"Ayanokōji-sensei…!"

"I'm not giving up the White Room or politics."

That was the only way.

"No matter how powerful Naoe is, he can't win against his lifespan. He'll die before we will."

If it has to take so long, so be it.

I'll let him enjoy his short political life to the fullest.

But when it's over, I'm gonna—

I laughed and slapped Kamogawa on the shoulder.

"It's not just Kijima. When I come back to politics, I'll make his son goes up in smokes too."

"Hahaha. When you say it, it doesn't sound like a joke."

Kamogawa's cheeks relaxed as he wiped away his tears.

2

After I put Kamogawa in a cab and he was taken home, I started walking alone on the dark snowy road.

I was alone now, and I needed to cool my hot head down.

I had to think about the future. I needed to know everything and clear my mind before I do that. I called *that* man on the cell phone.

It was late at night, but I was sure the call would go through.

“Tsukishiro, answer me. Why did Naoe give up his position to join Kijima?”

“That’s a funny thing to ask considering you called me.”

“You know everything, don’t you?”

“Naoe-sensei has always prided himself on being the best politician. But now he understands that Kijima-sensei is more than that.”

“Foolish.”

“Although the two of us have very different philosophies, we have more in common than you might think.”

“So… You think I’m gonna buy that?”

“Your involvement in the White Room isn’t something Kijima-sensei would appreciate.”

“What are you talking about? That guy has ANHS. We could even make the White Room his second maneuver.”

“ANHS is certainly one of his main operations. But at the same time, he was working on a similar new plan behind the scenes. In other words, his second maneuver was already in motion. It wouldn’t have been desirable for him to have that plan come out in front of the public.”

“…That’s why Naoe cut me off, huh…?”

“I don’t know at what stage he learned of this, but Kijima-sensei heard about the White Room… I can say that he had a discussion with

Naoe-sensei and one of the quid pro quo for calling it off was that he was promised a position in the future."

I didn't realize that Kijima was also thinking of a plan very similar to the White Room.

"That's not all. You were much more capable than Naoe-sensei had imagined. In the past few years, he relied on you a lot, but didn't you think you had a lot of unreasonable demands as well?"

"…Yes."

"That's probably because he was afraid of you. Along the way, they came to expect your downfall rather than taking advantage of you. But you didn't fail. No, you never once failed. You managed to cover your tracks and kept a low profile.

Naoe-sensei didn't raise you to the top. He was expecting your son to be his right-hand man to support him when he becomes a powerful enough man to lead the country in the future. Naoe's eye to see through everything had made only one wrong calculation. Your limitless ambition—that much he didn't seem to understand."

In ten years, even Naoe wouldn't be able to crush me.

So he took steps to prevent that from happening.

Was shutting down the White Room a gift for my son, or a bomb for me who might destroy him?

"Was my answer satisfactory to you?"

"Why were you so honest with me?"

"I wouldn't be talking to you if you were the one to be destroyed here. But my gut tells me otherwise. You will come back to the stage with more power. That's why I told you."

"A wise decision. But of course, you're going to play nice no matter what happens, aren't you?"

"That's a foolish question."

This guy wasn't just on my side. He could be on anyone's side at any time.

If he found me incompetent, he'd cut me off instantaneously.

"You can sell my information to Naoe or anyone you want. In return, I'll receive information from you. It's better for both of us if we can keep an eye on each other at all times."

"I agree."

"We're going to be friends for a long time, Tsukishiro."

"I hope so. Ayanokōji-sensei."

Saying this, Tsukishiro hung up the phone.

Yes, I wasn't going to stop here.

I'm going to thoroughly prepare myself and build up my strength to

protect my own life in the future.

And at the same time, I'll build up my army in the White Room.

•

200 meters high, 50 floors above ground.

A banquet on the middle floor of one of the tallest and most prestigious hotels in Tokyo. I arrived a little before the scheduled time and was thinking in the elevator as it started to ascend.

It would cost about 3,000,000 yen for a three-hour private party, just to serve food to about 60 people.

It might sound like a small expense, but considering the bleak financial situation, it wasn't cheap.

The parties were held every year since the facility began operations, and the scale of the parties has gradually increased.

We needed to raise more money than ever before.

Since Naoe had cut me off, the majority of the wealthy supporters turned their backs on me.

The fact that I was down to 60 supporters from the 200 I used to have was a testament to that.

I needed money. I needed to raise hundreds of millions of dollars.

All that was needed here today was one's own skill.

My eyes met my reflection in the huge elevator's full-length glass wall.

I was getting very old.

Looking back, I could calmly reflect on my age.

It was a miracle that I had been able to keep the White Room running.

But I still had a long way to go.

It had been a while since I was ousted from politics, but the fire of my own ambitions hadn't been extinguished but was burning brighter than ever.

I arrived at the floor I wanted to go to, got off the elevator, and went to the waiting room.

I lost my title as a politician, and now I was treated as an ex-politician.

Under normal circumstances, my coercive power would be greatly diminished.

However, my title as head of the White Room operations steadily increased my power.

Otherwise, those so-called wealthy people wouldn't be here.

"Ayanokōji-sensei, it's about time."

"Ah."

I had many thoughts on the matter, but the first priority was to solve the financial issue.

The larger the size of the White Room, the more it costs to maintain it.

In order to cover these costs, we needed to generate the money for the necessities, not money to be thrown away.

"Oh, sorry to keep you waiting."

"You're getting restless. How many times do you have to go to the bathroom?"

Tabuchi returned to the waiting room, sat down on a chair, and started to move his left leg up and down in small steps.

“When are you going to get out of this habit of yours?”

“I’m sorry, but If I don’t get this chance… I’m worried.”

Surely, a shortfall in funds would put the White Room project on the brink of a major impasse.

It would be better if it was only a temporary pause, but it would be fatal to end our students’ education.

It would be like raising baby birds and then having them die of a disease.

“Listen, Tabuchi. We cannot turn our backs on the fact that there’s no way out. But that’s why we have to take a strong step forward without looking back. Think about what happens after you fall.”

Tabuchi looked up at me as the speed of his shaking left foot slowed.

“You’re very strong, Ayanokōji-sensei.”

“Considering all I’ve been through, it doesn’t matter… Naoe used me, the White Room Project was canceled, and I lost my title as a politician…”

And yet, I never stopped moving forward.

I was proud of the fact that I had been walking on the road of hell all my life—something I couldn’t reveal to others.

Aside from people like Naoe and Kijima, it had reached the point where it was no longer easy for a mere politician to gain an audience with me.

I may have lost my title as a politician, but there was no doubt that I had surpassed my former self.

I noticed that Tabuchi’s legs had stopped shaking and his fists were clenched.

I had to show the people who believed in the White Room what I was capable of doing, I can’t let them regret it.

“Do you think you have a chance in today’s battle?”

“Of course. Do you know what the easiest and most powerful weapon that anyone can use is?”

“…What? Is there such a thing?”

“Yes, there is. Of course, it’s a risky double-edged sword. It’s called lying.”

“A lie…?”

“Some people have risen through the political world using the strength of a lie. That’s how powerful a lie can be.”

Of course, a lie was only meaningful if you used it well.

“We’ll make full use of this weapon. Tabuchi, this is the moment of truth in the White Room.”

“…Yes!”

3

The first thing rich people did was dress up in their finest clothes and compete on their outside appearance.

Then they moved on to the competition to display their houses, cars, and companies.

But then they ended up in unexpected places.

Usually, only adults attended these parties, and children were rarely seen.

However, when it came to the business world's top echelon, the opposite was true and the number of children attendees immediately increased.

This was because the children were expected to meet each other in the future.

Companies that cooperated with each other. Companies that were rivals.

It wasn't always bad to have their successors face-to-face in advance, regardless of their positions.

Above all, the more highly the parents thought of their children, the more often they brought them in.

The parents there would play their unique cards as if they were showing off their prized toys.

That was why the White Room had been accepted by the business world.

"Huh…"

Ironic, isn't it? I learned all of this from Naoe.

He may be a detested enemy now, but his power was undeniably top-notch and genuine.

The party had just begun. First of all, I greeted everyone while I showed my face to the whole floor.

“It’s been a long time, Ayanokōji-sensei.”

A man with a flashy hair color, unbefitting his middle-aged face approached me with a cheerful attitude.

I quickly switched to my business face, turned around, and offered him my right hand.

“It’s been a while, President Amasawa. I sent you an invitation, but I was afraid you might not come.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it last year. My girlfriend really wanted to spend her birthday in Hawaii. I’ve been so busy with work that I just couldn’t find the time. So we ended up buying a house in Hawaii and have been there ever since.”

“I’m glad to hear that your work and personal life are going well.”

He should be a little older than me, but in an unpleasant manner, I didn’t feel that way.

He was dressed in a brand favored by young people and wore sandals that didn't suit the occasion.

With that kind of attire, which couldn't even be considered within the dress code, it was no wonder that he'd be turned away at the door if he was greeted by a stranger.

He wasn't normal. He was trying to show that he was a unique and original person.

I didn't like this man's clothes or his way of thinking at all, but I couldn't resent him because he was one of the people who had given a large sum of money to the White Room.

He didn't attend the party last year, but he was able to offer funding for the White Room.

He was a welcome person and should be treated with care.

"It seems like you're no longer a politician, however, it doesn't feel that way to me. You're an evil politician no matter which way you look at it."

He smiled pleasantly as he pat my shoulder with the palm of his hand.

"So you'll treat me the same way you treat politicians?"

"Of course I will. I think highly of you, you know."

As we were having this silly conversation, I was thinking back to what Amasawa had said from the beginning.

This man's married, but it was obvious that the girlfriend he spent time with in Hawaii isn't his spouse.

"Excuse me."

Amasawa, who had been smiling, led me toward the window.

"Actually, I have a favor to ask of you, Ayanokōji-sensei."

"You're asking me of something? What's going on?"

"Well, my girlfriend in Hawaii is pregnant. She wants to have the baby in Japan and won't listen to me."

“Congratulations, but that’s a bit of a problem, isn’t it?”

“Right? My wife’s also suspicious that I’m cheating on her, and if she finds out that I’ve been having an affair in secret, there’ll be a lot of trouble.”

If he was going to mess around, he shouldn’t have gotten married in the first place, but that was another matter, wasn’t it?

“My girlfriend can’t possibly raise a child, but she’s also afraid I’ll cut ties with her. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have insisted on having the baby in Japan, being a Hawaii fanatic.”

He shrugged his shoulders in annoyance, but he didn’t seem to be in a great hurry.

“I’m thinking of giving the baby an education in the White Room… What do you think?”

“Would you be okay with that?”

“Yes. She wants me to have a baby with her, that’s the goal. She has no intention of becoming a mother and raising a child.”

From our view, we welcomed the idea of having more children without taking risks.

However, there were a number of things that needed to be confirmed.

“You’ve already placed your daughter in the White Room.”

“Would it be a problem to add another child?”

“Of course not, if it’s necessary. But is that okay with you?”

“It doesn’t matter. She gets to keep the baby, I get to put the kid in the White Room. Everyone is happy.”

To this man, the White Room was just a convenient daycare center or something.

It’s a good thing for us, as well. We couldn’t wish for anything better.

“You know what this party is about, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. Of course we’ll finance it, I’ll make sure of it. Right?”

He raised a finger.

“I’ll give you 100 million this year, double what I gave you last year. That’s a small price to pay for security.”

“Thank you. Do you know when the baby is due?”

“Oh, just a minute. I’ll notify you with the details by text.”

I got the hospital and the delivery date from my cell phone and called someone to make the arrangements.

“Well then, I’ll get back to you without delay.”

“Thanks.”

He nodded in satisfaction, picked up two champagne glasses from

the boy who passed by, and handed one to me.

“To the happiness of my new child, cheers!” he said.

He tipped his glass, clinked it, and downed the champagne in one gulp.

“By the way, President Amasawa, you know the rules of the White Room. Unless there’s a special reason, it’s basically impossible for you to see the child. You’ll only be able to see them on a regular basis when they’re of age or when they leave the White Room.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard that before.”

“Are you sure about that? There’s no exception, even for mothers.”

“Of course. I’m sure she’ll understand if you send her pictures regularly.”

I didn’t care how he got the money, but we had our own rules of engagement.

There was one more thing I needed to make sure of.

“President Amasawa… I know it’s been a long time since we took custody of your first daughter, but you haven’t visited us once to check on her yet. Have you thought about what you’ll do in the future?”

It was relatively rare for a parent who entrusted their child to the White Room to not even visit to check on the child’s progress.

Most of them come to check up on their children to see how they are doing.

“In the first place, she’s a baby that was made in a test tube, so I don’t even feel like she’s my own child.”

Amasawa said disinterestedly that this was just an extension of his free time.

Various children were placed in the White Room.

Some were test-tube babies like Amasawa’s child, others were siblings where one of whom was raised separately, and others were actually tested to see how well they were educated in the White Room.

We had to be aware of their circumstances and feelings, and always try to control them in a way that wouldn’t offend the children.

“So I’ll leave it all to you from here.”

“So far, your child has grown to become the second best among the fifth-generation students. As long as she doesn’t drop out, she’ll be of some use to us.”

“Of course. You can do whatever you want with her.”

He placed his hand on my shoulder again in a familiar manner and started humming in his good mood.

Some people who amassed billions upon billions of dollars in assets thought their children’s lives were worthless.

Although there were very few, Amasawa was one of them.

He didn’t believe that his child had any status and was only

concerned about himself.

There may be a chance in the future to take another child from Amasawa in this way.

“Well, I’m going home now. I want to enjoy Japan for the first time in a while.”

“I’ll see you off.”

I left Amasawa, who was in a good mood, with my men and saw him off right there.

I was in the mood to take a break, but there was no time to rest.

4

I greeted the important figures I needed to talk to in a hurry.

As a result, I succeeded in speaking with several presidents since Amasawa and in getting new loans.

We had not reached our unofficial goal yet, but I'd say we were off to a good start.

The party had been going on for about an hour.

Here I decided to take a short break for the first time.

My jaw was feeling a little tired from all the talking.

But I didn't waste any time even when standing still.

It was important to keep an eye on the atmosphere and always be on the lookout for signs of life.

As I approached to get a glass of wine from a servant, I felt a slight shock at my feet.

A child that was running in my direction bumped into me and ran off without a word of apology.

I wondered where he was going in such a hurry and noticed him at the corner of the hall.

It seemed that there were several children clustered around there.

Most of the parents knew each other from various parties, so it was no surprise that all the children taken to the party were connected to each other.

Although the children were somewhat separated from the parents, their high-pitched voices often echoed through the room, especially when they screamed.

More and more screams piled up. There was no way of stopping a group like this after it formed.

I approached to warn them, but I realized that they weren't playing with each other.

They were all boys, including the kid who rushed to the scene. Three of the five boys were surrounding another child, yelling at him and accusing him of something. The remaining one watched from a distance, but there was no fear in his expression. I stopped because I was afraid that the children might've noticed me listening in on their situation if I got any closer.

The children all seemed to be around the same age as Kiyotaka. I have no contact with ordinary children, so it was interesting to compare them with the children in the White Room.

When I slowly approached the children, I could see that they weren't talking in a friendly manner.

Most children don't know when and where the right time to fight is and easily start conflicts.

Usually over unimportant things.

"Did you really ever get Kazuya's autograph?"

The kid who rushed to the scene seemed to be the leader of the group, and he approached the group with his friends and family in tow.

"…Yes, I did."

He replied while averting his gaze.

At first glance, it didn't seem like he was telling the truth.

"That's a lie. When I met Kazuya, he said he doesn't usually sign autographs."

"Really… I'm sure he does…"

"Where did you get him to sign it?"

"He came to my house."

"He came to your house? What? That's a lie. Kazuya told me that I was the first kid he signed an autograph for outside of the venue."

"He really did do it. He signed a soccer ball for me…!"

The conversation seemed to be discussing whether or not they had ever gotten an autograph from a Japanese soccer player named Kazuya who plays overseas.

The three of them, including the leader, were suspicious of one timid-looking child.

The suspected child's suspicious behavior must've been felt by the rest of the boys.

It seems that a cheap lie told for the sake of bragging led him into a tight corner.

"Then let's take a majority vote on whether we think he's lying or not."

Immediately, the three children raised their hands in unison as they laughed.

The boy who had been watching the conversation didn't raise his hand, so of course he was asked for his stance on the matter.

"Which side are you on, Ryuuji?"

The leader of the group, a kid who called the others by their first names, asked for his opinion.

"…I don't care. I don't need to pick a side."

"What do you mean you don't care? I'm asking you if you also think he's lying?"

"If I'm being objective, I think you're lying. You'd better apologize as soon as possible."

The child called Ryuuji decided that the other boy was lying and urged him to apologize. The difference in the number of people in the group made it less advantageous for one to cover for him.

It's true that the best thing to do would be to apologize right then and there, but that isn't that easy for human beings.

"I'm not lying…"

Ryuuji sighed in exasperation at the child's stubborn refusal to admit that it was a lie.

"Why don't you forgive him already? It's obvious he's lying, so there's no need to go on with this any longer."

"What? I'm going to ask my father to shut down your parents' company if you keep acting like a big shot, okay?"

He flaunted his parents' power as if it was his own and acted like a king…

"Nogi-kun, if you make fun of me, you'll get in real trouble."

Nogi? The Nogi Pharmaceuticals, huh?

They're one of the most powerful and accomplished of all the wealthy individuals who were attending here today.

It was a ridiculous claim, but it's true that his father has some power.

He seems to have failed miserably in his children's education.

"Then how can you be satisfied? What do you want from Fuji?"

The three of them—Ryuuji, Fuji, and Nogi—were acquainted with each other's *groups*.

"Get on your knees, get on your knees. I'll forgive you if you get on your knees and tell me you're sorry for lying."

That was really cliché. I don't think President Nogi's the kind of person who would normally force people to get down on their knees, but it was understandable for a child to say something like this.

"As I said, I didn't do such a thing as telling a lie."

“Then show me proof. If you can’t give me proof or refuse to get down on your knees, I’ll beat you up.”

Growing increasingly frustrated, Nogi licked his lips in frustration.

“You’d better get down on your knees as soon as possible.”

Ryuuji kept his attitude, encouraging him to apologize, but Fuji shook his head from side to side.

He continued to insist that he got the autograph, even though he was in tears.

It seems the time had come.

I couldn’t let this go on any longer, even if it was just an elongated children’s quarrel.

If the situation turned bloody, President Nogi's name would be tarnished.

But the situation seemed to have suddenly changed.

"Fuji isn't lying. At least, I think so."

With the conclusion thought to have already been decided, a sixth child appeared.

All four of them, including the passive Ryuuji, had already decided that he was lying.

The appearance of the one who insisted that he wasn't lying, of course, ended that mood.

"What's wrong with you? Whoever you are, you're defending this guy?"

"Do you think there's any advantage for Fuji to keep lying in the face of you strong-looking guys?"

The kid insisted that it was strange for him to be stubborn.

"I don't know whether or not he's your friend, but you're just trying to cover for him, aren't you? You're a liar."

"I'm not covering for him for no reason. I just thought it was true."

The child stood in front of the three of them with a nonchalant attitude.

"Ishigami…"

"I'm sorry, Fuji. I got stuck while talking to Dad."

"What?"

A child called Ishigami gently caressed the arm of the crying child and faced Nogi and the others.

But here was where the savior was unexpectedly confronted.

"I'm sorry, Ishigami, but I think Fuji is lying."

"What makes you think he's lying?"

“There’s no evidence to prove that he’s lying, but there’s no proof that he’s telling the truth either. In that case, we can only judge him by his attitude.”

“Judging by his attitude? I don’t think it’s possible to make an impartial judgment when you’re surrounded by people like this and forced to half-heartedly admit to a lie. You’re just making decisions based on the flow of the situation.”

“But Nogi said that Kazuya doesn’t usually sign autographs. He said he was the first.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, that’s right. That’s what Kazuya said when he signed it for me, you idiot.”

“But you don’t have any proof that what you say is true, do you?”

“What? Look at this! Here’s a picture of me and Kazuya!”

Nogi showed the screen of his cell phone.

“And? This was taken two months ago. Couldn’t Fuji have gotten his autograph after that? And since you have the photo, it must be true that you got him to sign it, but it’s not the same as proving that he doesn’t usually sign things, right? Weren’t you lying because you wanted to boast that you were given special treatment?”

He confronted him with the proof, but it seems that gave him the opportunity to take advantage of Nogi.

“I didn’t lie! I’m gonna kick your ass!”

“Stop it, Ishigami. Why are you making such a nonsensical objection? The other day, you didn’t even argue when you got into it with a guy in your grade at cram school. Just apologize and things will go peacefully.”

“I only did that because I was the only one involved. If you get angry every time someone of a lower level says something, you’ll have a hard time. But if your friend’s in trouble, that’s a different story.”

The content of this conversation, at various times, showed that Ishigami was a very talented child.

That’s probably why this Ryuuji kid bit back.

“What does your father do? He’s better than us, isn’t he?”

Of course, it was none of my business, but President Ishigami isn’t the president of a big company.

“Parental power has nothing to do with it. What about your own ability?”

But in terms of his children’s education and talent, he’s a cut above the rest.

They either carry very good genes or were the results of their education.

“I’ll beat you up!”

Nogi breathed, swinging his right arm in a broad gesture.

“Wait a minute.”

Ishigami, who was about to be hit by Nogi, interrupted.

You'd think that he'd apologize in fear, but that wasn't the case.

"When you hit someone, you should grab them by the chest first so they can't run away. If you miss your strike, you might fall down and end up not looking very cool, right?"

"What…?"

The boy froze, his fists clenched.

"I'm not proud of it, but I've never been in a fight. However, I can at least run away from you, which means we'll end up running around here screaming at each other. You know that the more significant your father is, the more shame you're gonna bring to his name. Am I right?"

The party room was filled with laughter and elegant music was loudly playing.

Though, when a child shouts, it's inevitable that he would be noticed.

"Listen, if you're going to strike me, you'd better grab this area with your left hand first. That's how they do it on TV and in dramas when they hit people."

Nogi followed his lead and grabbed the collar of his neck with his left hand.

The remaining children surrounded Ishigami so that he couldn't escape.

"I'll give you what you want!"

Nogi, at close range, threatened Ishigami.

Then he raised his fist again.

"Now you can't escape!"

"And neither can you!"

"What…?"

Immediately after saying this, Ishigami grabbed the arms that were grabbing him with both hands.

He grabbed his face and didn't let go of his hands.

Then he turned his attention to an adult in the distance.

He glanced at me for a moment, but then he looked away and called out to another adult.

"Please help me! Somebody help me!!"

"Hey—!"

The adults turned around at the earnest shout and looked at Ishigami, who was grabbed by the collar and surrounded by three kids who were about to beat him up. It was irrelevant whether they were right or wrong.

The only thing that came to mind was a scene of a group of kids who was outnumbering another, ready to commit violence.

Nogi's name was powerful, but of course, it had no other place than in the ramblings of children now.

"What are you doing?!"

Nogi and the others ran away as if they were rabbits. The three

remaining were Fuji, Ryuuji, and Ishigami, who were all in tears.

“Kanzaki-kun… you could’ve done something about those guys.”

“…I hate trouble. And beating them up wasn’t going to fix it.”

“I didn’t say you should hit them. I’m saying you should’ve let them talk it out. I understand that it’s easier to just let it go, but by not doing anything, there’s a possibility that it will become even more troublesome, especially with someone who tries to wield parental power.”

“But he was lying, wasn’t he?”

Ryuuji asked for the truth.

Ishigami didn’t need to respond to the question. Fuji’s expression revealed the answer.

“There are times when I want to keep lying,” he said.

“I don’t understand… It’s a lie with no merit.”

“If Fuji had been a friend of yours, Kanzaki-kun, would you have helped him? Or would you still abandon him as well?”

“…I…”

“At least I would help my dear friend if he was in trouble. No matter what it takes.”

Compared to the childish, or rather, age-appropriate children, Ryuuji and Ishigami seemed to be able to make relatively calm judgments. However, their way of thinking was different.

Ishigami seems to have done better on this occasion, but it’s also true that he actually crossed a dangerous bridge.

If Fuji had admitted to lying and apologized, as Ryuuji said, Nogi and the others might’ve forgiven him earlier. Of course, he must be prepared to be laughed at.

“Ayanokōji-sensei… I apologize for the delay.”

I was just about to finish observing the children when Sakayanagi came walking toward me, slightly out of breath.

“You came, Sakayanagi?”

“Of course I came. Even though we may have started to go in different directions, my respect for you has not changed.”

With that, I gently shook hands with Sakayanagi, whom I haven’t seen for a long time.

The welcoming party began as the adults started to move about, and there was movement on the children’s side as well.

“Good evening, Kanzaki-kun.”

“You just arrived, Sakayanagi?”

“Hello. Sorry, I already have to get going, Kanzaki-kun. I’ll see you at cram school.

“…Oh.”

“You have a rather grim look on your face, what’s wrong?”

Ryuuji answered that he was fine and walked away as if to escape from the situation.

“Your daughter has grown a lot in the little time I’ve been away from you, hasn’t she?”

“As a parent, I’m often bewildered by her many precocious ways,” he said.

Although she seems to be intelligent, she seems to have a long history of dealing with the disease—her birth handicap.

At one point, I invited him to enroll her into the White Room, but he was right to turn me down.

The facility requires, at a minimum, that you be above average in all aspects.

“I know it’s a problem for you in your position to be too close to me, but I really appreciate you coming.”

“Thank you, Ayanokōji-sensei.”

Smiling happily, Sakayanagi took his daughter to greet the others.

“Anyways”

I walked over to the boy, Ishigami, who was looking at me from a distance.

“What do you want from me?”

“The same goes to you. You’ve been looking at me. What did you want with me?”

“You noticed?”

I didn’t think he had the time to look around in that situation.

“I have something I want to ask. Why didn’t you call out to me when you asked for help from an adult?”

“I was aware that you heard Fuji’s call for help from early on, but you remained silent. I couldn’t guarantee that you’d be on my side.”

There was no denying that if I had turned away while offering a helping hand, the child could’ve been beaten up in the meantime. So, at that stage, with less than a few seconds to go before he would’ve been beaten up, Ishigami selected an adult who would surely help Fuji.

“Hey, Kyou! I hope you’re not giving any trouble to Ayanokōji-sensei!”

With a panicked voice, the chairman of the Ishigami Group appeared.

“I thought you were an exceedingly smart child. You’re the son of Chairman Ishigami, aren’t you?”

Gorou Ishigami, who was over 60 years old, was still the chairman of the Ishigami Group, yet his power remained strong. He had no children with his ex-wife… Was he a child conceived from another wife whom he married after his bereavement?

“Go eat your dinner over there.”

“Okay, father.”

Bowing lightly, Chairman Ishigami's son left.

"I hope our Kyou didn't give you any trouble, did he?"

"I've been rather impressed with him."

"That's fine, but since he's old enough to be… my grandson, I'm not too happy about it."

It's understandable that he's so fond of him.

But what I appreciated most was his calmness.

"You seem to have given him a good upbringing."

"Thank you, sir."

He was far superior to me in terms of position, but his manner was soft and polite.

If he grows up properly, the Ishigami group will be succeeded by that child, and a solid generational transition will be possible.

The only concern is his age.

He will take over in his early twenties at the earliest. If he's going to proceed with caution, he would have to be over 30 years old. By then, President Ishigami would be over 90 years old.

"You're planning to return to politics at some point, aren't you, President Ishigami?"

"Of course I intend to."

"Then, will you have your son by your side someday?"

"My son… by my side?"

He thought I was joking but he couldn't see any deception in my expression.

"Yes. He seems to be interested in politics. As a parent, I try to understand my son's feelings as much as I can since he doesn't usually pay much attention to things."

He smiled, wrinkling his cheeks as he said that he was more than happy for him to follow in his footsteps.

"If he wants to go into politics when he grows up, then I will welcome him."

They were just a few comments, but I could see a glimpse of talent in the kid.

Whether or not he's suited for politics is another matter entirely, though.

5

The three-hour party was now down to its last 30 minutes.

I was able to secure enough financing to run the party, The party also included a reunion with Sakayanagi.

It was also good to know that there were people who were waiting for my return to politics.

“Ayanokōji-sensei! May I have a moment of your time?”

“You are…?”

“I’m Tomohiro Kanzaki of Kanzaki Engineers. It’s a great honor to meet you..”

“Are you President Kanzaki? It’s a pleasure to meet you too.”

I remember that when the White Room Project was launched and the particulars of the project were passed on to some conglomerates, one of them was willing to invest in the project.

However, since the company didn’t have much history as an established company and had little connection with the political world, we eventually rejected the offer for our own reasons. Two years later, however, the same company raised a small amount of money for the project without any interference or guidance from outside parties.

“This is my son, Ryuuji,” he said, “Say hello, Ryuuji.”

“…My name is Ryuuji Kanzaki.”

The child averted his eyes from me and greeted me quietly.

I see… the kid from earlier.

“He seems to be a bright boy.”

“I’m very proud of him. I want him to become both a literary and martial artist, so I teach him everything I can at cram schools, private tutoring, etc. Not to mention karate and judo.”

“I had a hunch that you were passionate about education, President

Kanzaki.”

“As for karate, he was recently praised by the head instructor as having the ability to be a black belt at this point in his training.”

“Well, he seems to have grown up well.”

But if what he said was true, there was something that didn’t add up.

I gently focused my attention away from the president and decided to speak with Ryuuji instead.

“I would like to ask you one question… You saw another boy getting into trouble earlier, but you didn’t try to help him in any concrete way.”

“…That was…”

“Of course, they outnumbered you, but President Kanzaki told me that you’re very good at what you do. You could’ve come up with any number of ways to deal with them, couldn’t you?”

Pretending to be ignorant of the circumstances, I asked him this question.

“It was none of my business.”

He looked away awkwardly.

“It’s true that you weren’t the one who started the conflict. But if you had helped, the other party would’ve been in your debt. A debt that you could potentially make use of in the future.”

“…”

“If you don’t have the power to help, you can run away or ignore it. But if you have the power and don’t use it, you are a fool.”

I had no interest in this child, but I spoke passionately and put my hand on the boy’s head.

“Think hard, worry hard, and become a good adult. Be a man who can help others. Support your father, and eventually, you’ll be able to lead the company yourself.”

If I preached this in front of President Kanzaki, he wouldn’t be able to be rude to me and he’d have a hard time withdrawing his investment. There’s nothing better than pulling in as much money as you can.

“…Thank you very much for your time… I’ll see what I can do.”

Impressed by my words, he bowed his head happily, this was very much unlike his stiff expression at the beginning of our conversation.

6

After the party ended, I went into the waiting room and leaned back in my chair, not bothering to hide my tiredness.

“I’m sorry to be looking like this. I was so shaken that I lost my nerve.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure you haven’t had a good night’s sleep in the last few days.”

“Seems like you’ve seen through me.”

“You aren’t afraid of pushing yourself to the very limits, am I right, Ayanokōji-sensei? Besides, this is a time of great crisis for the White Room. I expected that you’d remain calm until the end, no matter what the situation. I’m truly amazed at your mental strength.”

I faintly waved Sakayanagi off and told him to stop with the pleasantries.

“Tell me why you came here. I’m sure you didn’t just come here to say goodbye.”

“I’ve spoken with my father and he’s agreed to let me be the president of the Advanced Nurturing High School in the near future.”

“Oh? You’re finally taking the stage. You’ve seen it all, and your final choice is to follow in your father’s footsteps. It’s not a very interesting ending, but it’s just like you, Sakayanagi.”

“Thank you very much. I’m grateful to have been able to study under you for so many years, Ayanokōji-sensei.”

He didn’t look happy, but I guess that was because of what I was going to tell him next.

Now that he turned out to be the successor, it wasn’t necessary to speculate on the reasons for this.

“It would be very problematic for the president of a high school if it became known that he was cooperating with a man like me. It’s a good time to break off the relationship.”

“Although we have different views, I hold you in the highest regard,

Ayanokōji-sensei… I was really surprised when you defied Naoe-sensei, but it made me realize how genuine your passion for the White Room is. That's why… It's a shame that we have to keep our distance."

It was a bit of a cliché line, but it's the kind of thing Sakayanagi would say.

“I’m not obsessed with the White Room. I’m a have-not. I just know that if I didn’t resist Naoe, he would’ve taken it all away from me. Even if I survive as a politician, there would be no hope for my career. Japan is too tied to the seniority system. No matter how capable you are, if you’re young, you’ll be sifted out. Or if you try to force your way out, they’ll try to cut off your wings. But if you look around the world, you’ll see that it’s becoming increasingly common for people in their twenties to be in important positions and some in their thirties at the top of their countries.”

No matter how hard I try to restrain myself, my ambition is inexhaustible.

“How can we leave the world of politics any longer in the hands of a bunch of old fools who have only a short time left to live? They think it’s enough if they’re able to secure themselves for the time they have left to live out the rest of their lives. They’re willing to give up the flesh and blood of their country to protect themselves for the next 10 or 20 years. Then what will happen 30 years from now? And 40 years from now?”

Japan will be devoured by other nations, and there won’t be anything left to salvage.

If I judge people to be competent, I will hire and use them.

Of course, there will be a lot of ambitious people who will come to take advantage of me in my sleep or people who will do things in the dark under someone else’s orders, but as long as they’re competent, I will use them.

Otherwise, the corrupted blood in the political world won’t be replaced and will remain stagnant forever.

Fighting for one’s own position doesn’t do any good to the nation.

“Indeed, that’s what I’m wondering, too… You’re only qualified to be the head of a country when you’re in your 60s or 70s. I can understand why you might be suspicious of that.”

“We will make the White Room firm and resolute, then send in enough people to rewrite this country’s organizational system. We’re going to overhaul the system from the ground up.”

It may be mocked as a pipe dream, but I’m going to get there in the

end.

“It’s a grand plan. It may take more than 10 or 20 years to complete.”

“I know. It may take more than my generation to change everything. For this, we will need someone to take over the White Room. It’s also important to create ‘educators’ who can create more perfect human beings than we have now.”

Some of the children are already performing beyond the scope of Suzukake’s curriculum.

“But I would still rather stand in front of the next generation, if at all possible. My ambition has never waned. Once a man steps up to great power, it is impossible for him to go back to where he first started. As long as Naoe-sensei is in the Civic Party, my seat will never be taken.”

“To my understanding, the opposition has approached you several times.”

“You’re a well-informed person, aren’t you? You certainly know a lot of things. I’m sure the opposition parties would love to have me. But if I join the party, I’ll only be used. Unless things change, I have to wait. That’s where my fight starts. I have to build up the children’s strength to get the White Room students elected. By then, my obstacles—my superiors—will be dead or retired.”

“It’s really a daunting story, isn’t it?”

I have a firm belief in my own successes and failures through my experiences.

That is, I don’t imitate successful people.

If you could succeed by imitating successful people, no one would have any trouble.

Then what do you do? That is, don’t do what unsuccessful people do.

Most people in this world aren’t successful. Observe them and try not to make the same mistake.

This is not the same thing as imitating the successful. I think it’s a very important point of view and I’ve been putting it into practice.

“Good luck, Sakayanagi… I’ll see you again someday.”

I shook hands with Sakayanagi and said goodbye.

After seeing Sakayanagi off at the entrance, I gazed silently at the cityscape below.

In this world, there’s a phrase: “merits and demerits.”

It means “achievement and transgression.” It’s a useful word that encapsulates both good and bad.

The phrase “merits and demerits” is often used and appropriate for many famous politicians.

On the surface, they succeed in various reforms, but behind the scenes, they’re just fattening their pockets to an enormous extent.

The problem is that these achievements and transgressions aren’t equal.

In the eyes of others, five transgressions are more important than ten achievements.

In other words, if you save ten people but let five people die, you're evil.

That's what the masses would say.

Save ten people and allow no one to be unhappy.

Save a hundred people and allow no one to be unhappy.

If you save a thousand people but make one person unhappy, you're evil.

This is the psychology of the masses.

Of course, a few will say, "You saved a thousand people, so you should be willing to sacrifice a little."

But there's another trick here.

It's that those who criticize others are very loud.

When about 10% of the population voices complaints, the media picks up the voices of criticism with joy.

This creates the illusion that the whole country is criticizing you.

Such a feeling of wanting to criticize someone rather than praising them attracts people's attention.

Epilogue:

Looking Ahead

"TODAY IS MARCH 11TH. Recorded by Suzukake Tanji."

Suzukake put his cell phone camera in video mode and placed it on his desk.

He turned the lens to face himself.

"I've been leading the education in the White Room for a long time now."

On this day, Suzukake decided to quietly leave his thoughts on his research stored in his cell phone.

"But the White Room will be stagnant for a while after today. I don't know anything about politics, but it seems that a politician named Naoe has been trying to prevent Ayanokōji-sensei's return. What a hassle. But I've decided to look on the bright side. It's been a long time since I've been on vacation; maybe the stagnancy isn't a bad thing."

Taking a breath, Suzukake turned off the computer monitor.

"Humans are really interesting. As is true with all children, they learn things they are not taught. I noticed this in the first four generations' education and introduced a communication curriculum from the fifth generation onward. Of course, this has led to some inefficiencies. As a result of developing emotions, the rate of increase in ability decreased. Still, the difficulty level of the curriculum slightly exceeds the previous generations, so the students in the fifth generation and onwards have better abilities than the students from the third generation."

Punishment should be given, and emotions should simply be considered a bonus.

Suzukake hadn't changed his approach.

"From the ten difficulty levels that we've made, the curriculum that we have prepared for the fifth generation is difficulty level four, and for the sixth generation, difficulty level five. This is probably the limit.

The sixth level that we applied to the seventh generation already caused all of them to drop out of the program. Eventually, these children will become ideal adults. They will be able to integrate into the world as one of the world's best."

Suzukake was silent for a moment.

“I guess we can find out about all of this by looking in the files. Though, the reason I decided to document this today is to remember the heat of the run. The White Room has already seen many kids learn and then drop out, but still that kid… Ayanokōji Kiyotaka is a great existence. That child has an uncanny ability to learn, adapt, and apply. His talent continues to amaze me every day, and his reputation never ceases to grow… The researchers in the White Room believe that they can train that child in the same way as the others, but in my opinion, he’s the exception. He’s even more unique in this distorted environment. A true mutation.”

Through the Beta curriculum of his own creation, the product of the most challenging and thorough education was created.

“No… I don’t even know if I can call him a product. In any case, there’s no way to reproduce it. But even Kiyotaka was imperfect from the beginning. Whether it was studies, karate, or boxing, the first results he showed us were rather unremarkable and ordinary. That’s the difference. He’s extremely good at absorbing power and sublimating it into his own ability. Once he finished learning the basics, he began developing the skills to deal with what he was exposed to for the first time, using his extraordinary ability to apply what he learned.”

When he closed his eyes, Kiyotaka’s image remained burned into the back of his eyelids.

“By the eighth year, the remaining children were down to five. Considering that there were 74 children at the beginning, the dropout rate was over 93%. The average dropout rate from the first to the third year was 27%, and 30% from the fifth year onward. The curriculum was reckless. At this point, I was afraid that all of them would’ve dropped out in the middle of their ninth year. No… I was rather hoping that they’d drop out. In the case where there was a child who could stay and continue to follow a curriculum that no human being should ever follow… That child would no longer be human, they’d be a monster. That cannot exist. As if to bring that reality into existence, when the new spring arrived, there was only one child left. But here’s the problem. That one remaining child hasn’t shown any sign of dropping out after 10, 11, 12 years. On the contrary, he’s come to outperform us researchers and leaders. The adults with superficial knowledge left the White Room in less than a few days, holding their heads in their hands. The original purpose of the White Room was to continue education into adulthood, but the

thought of six more years… I can't do it. That kid is going to outgrow us in the near future. This isn't a hunch, it's a certainty. And at the same time, I don't know why that's possible. Is it the product of my curriculum or a genetic mutation? I can't prove why he didn't drop out and continued to survive. It's driving me crazy."

So—how should the existence of the White Room and Kiyotaka be viewed in the future?

The final decision will be made by Ayanokōji Atsuomi, the head of this facility, but the debate among the researchers will be sharply divided.

"The question of whether or not it was possible to create artificial geniuses remained unanswered, but it had been proven that it was possible to create brilliant people through the White Room. However, there's always a ceiling on every child's abilities."

Suzukake looked at the empty cup that, until a few minutes ago, contained sencha tea. He opened the cap of the brand-new mineral water and put both the cup and bottle cap in his hand.

"This is the size of the educator's talent," Suzukake said. "This small cap is, so to speak, the limit of an ordinary educator's talent. The much larger cup, compared to this cap, can be easily understood as the talent of the educators in the White Room. The children who receive education raised their own limits according to the limits of the educators' talents. If the average person is cap-sized, the education here allows them to develop their talent to the size of this cup."

He poured fresh mineral water into the cup.

"Once you hit the limit, there's basically no room for further growth. The water overflows and there's no new information to absorb… No, that isn't the correct expression. Every time we absorb new knowledge, we lose a little of our old talent, and we don't even realize that it's happening."

Suzukake sighed as he watched the water flow over the desk and disperse.

"There are many problems ahead. First, there are only a limited number of people with talent the size of this cup. Secondly, even if they have the talent, they don't necessarily have the skills to teach it. Thirdly, it's not always possible to obtain talents of the same magnitude between educators and students. The upper limit is the size of a cup, but some individuals are often one or two times smaller than it. Of course, there are cases of children who are one or two sizes larger than the upper limit, but the probability is less than the former. And then the most important part. The most important part is that the geniuses in this world are not limited to the size of a cup. They're more talented than this bottle of mineral water. There's no one who has such a talent while also having a talent for educating. Even if they did, the children would probably never grow to be bigger than the cup."

This was also true of the data from previous studies.

"A generous education that takes care of children, or the exact opposite—a strict education. In either case, both show that there's a limit to a child's potential."

The White Room's goal is to create geniuses out of ordinary people

and train them to be competitive in the world.

“It’s possible to intentionally create people in humanity’s top 10%. In this sense, the White Room’s an institution that can produce solid results. But it may not be able to create people who are in the top 0.01% to compete with the rest of the world.”

A true sense of failure as a researcher.

Suzukake keenly felt that when he thought about the existence of Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.

“At the moment, I can’t see the upper limit of talent in that child. He absorbs as much as you teach him. It could be said that he was born as a genius, or that he was the result of his education in the White Room. Both of which I think are correct and incorrect. If Kiyotaka hadn’t been educated in the White Room, he probably would’ve merely been a reasonably competent person. If either component was missing, he wouldn’t have been as he is now… And… If Kiyotaka continues his education in the White Room, it’s obvious that he’ll be an asset to raise new generations’ talent ceiling. If Kiyotaka were to stand in my place and nurture these children, they would grow up to be more like plastic bottles than cups. I would love to see that happen.”

Angels and demons asked the question in his mind.

If he were to send him out as a leader to lead Japan, instead of just an educator in the small White Room, how much would he accomplish?

Which is the more meaningful choice for Japan and for the future?

He wasn’t the final judge, but he wondered what choice Ayanokōji-sensei would make.

“I’m going to see it all through, and I’m going to be involved in the White Room’s education for the rest of my life, regardless of what he chooses to do.”

He had never had so much fun, and he was filled with a sense of fulfillment unlike when he was forced to flee Japan and go abroad.

“However good Ayanokōji Kiyotaka may be, the question remained as to whether he was a true genius or not. Emotionally, he was far below the average person, and he didn’t know what most people did. He may learn by memorization, but it remains to be seen how much of a negative effect that will have on him. He was defective.”

As he continued, Suzukake reached for his cell phone and stopped the recording.

“I wonder if that child I created will be… happy at the end of his life…”

As a researcher, Suzukake felt a strong reluctance to record such remarks.

1

It was a day when the cherry blossoms were in full bloom. I left Saitama and returned to Tokyo for the first time in several months.

Instead of my home in Meguro-ku, where I had settled several years ago, I drove to my office, which I hadn't visited for a long time.

"How long has it been since I last came here…?"

I looked up from the window of my car at the soon-to-be-demolished building and gave my orders.

I pulled over to the shoulder of the road, turned on the hazard lights, and got out.

I had been out of politics for a long time, but the time for my return was near.

Naoe, the fixer who has been lurking in the shadows of Kijima, was now over 80 years old and had been suffering from a serious illness. He was back in politics, ostensibly cured of his illness, but in reality, his life was hanging on by a thread.

The proof was in the sabotage of the White Room and the relentless pressure from Naoe's side on his supporters in the shadows. He decided that he had to get rid of me before his own life was extinguished.

It was a blow to have the White Room temporarily suspended, but I changed my mind, thinking that it would give me just enough time to prepare for a comeback from the situation.

"I'm getting old, same goes for Naoe."

Soon my battle for political office will begin again.

The signs and premonitions… Kamogawa, whom I had not seen since that day when I talked with Naoe at the ryotei, showed up at my doorstep as if to congratulate me.

"It's been a long time, Ayanokōji-sensei. I didn't expect you to come all the way here to pick me up."

"Don't worry about it. How's it going over there?"

We had been talking on the phone, but in recent years, my face-to-face contact with him had become even rarer than with Sakayanagi. I had to be careful not to do anything that would get me caught in Naoe's watchful eye.

"Thanks to you, I'm doing well. Is everything alright with you too, Sensei?"

"You're the one who should be called 'sensei' since you keep getting elected."

When I jokingly mentioned this, Kamogawa replied with a very serious face.

“It’s true that you’re not a politician now, but you’ve brought in many wealthy people and head the White Room, a well-known educational institution. The rumors never cease.”

I’ve certainly survived the hard times.

Although I was exiled from the political world, I’ve now taken in many business people from the White Room, and have taken a path that I couldn’t have imagined as my own fortune.

Although my title as a politician no longer existed, more people called me “Sensei” than ever before.

“I hear in the White Room that your son is quite brilliant.”

“Is it ironic? I’ve been on the radar so much that I had to shut it down temporarily.”

Kamogawa laughed bitterly, but he still had the same look in his eyes as before.

No, he seemed to have grown up once or twice more than before.

“I think you already know that. As you can already tell, Naoe-sensei is pulling the strings behind the scenes. I don’t think he’s going to reveal the White Room to the public since he’ll get himself burnt too, but he’s starting to use all kinds of methods to try to get rid of it.”

“If this wasn’t his idea, they would’ve shut it down by now. He seems to be making it very difficult for them in that respect. What’s his next move?”

“I don’t know at the moment. I’ve managed to hang on to the Naoe-sensei faction, but I used to work beside you, Ayanokōji-sensei, so he doesn’t trust me.”

It would be difficult to get past Naoe’s defenses even if I tried to force Kamogawa to probe.

Rather, it is more essential to keep him concealed inside the faction.

“It’s just that… his health seems to have been deteriorating a lot lately.”

Kamogawa muttered in a hushed voice beside me.

“It’s a little bit frustrating that I can’t bury him with my own hands, but I guess it’s best to let the disease bury him.”

That’s why Naoe is an opponent in the political world who doesn’t show any openings that you could take advantage of.

And given his age, he’ll be in the spotlight very soon.

“Finally, your return is coming soon, isn’t it?”

“Yes. But even if he disappears, it won’t make it any easier for me to get to the top of the political world. No, in fact, it will be far more difficult than before.”

I thought Naoe-sensei was one of the biggest names in politics, but I believe President Kijima, who’s keeping control of politics well, will be even bigger than that.

If he continued in this fashion, he'd soon break the record for the longest tenure in office.

He's still in his sixties. Kijima's era will continue for another 10 to 20 years. As a young man, I myself am steadily getting older.

This will be my last chance to make a move.

"That's why I'm going to make sure I'm in the right place at the right time."

A temporary pause in the White Room.

Whether it'll be six months or five years, there's no telling how long it'll last, but the last thing I want is for it to be publicized. But it would be a relief to know that Naoe's side is on the same page.

He's surely plotting and scheming to somehow bury the matter in the dark.

The car arrived and Tabuchi opened the back seat door.

Kamogawa slowly climbed into the passenger seat.

"Tabuchi, what about the arrangements?"

"As planned, the children will be supervised and managed by a temporary orphanage."

"Right."

"And your son—are you sure about this?"

"I'm not going to give him preferential treatment just because he's my son. But at least as long as he's the best of the best in the White Room, he's entitled to it, to the point it makes me hesitate, but in another sense, that's also meaningful."

We drove to our destination and waited for Kiyotaka to leave the clinic.

"Even so, it's a counseling clinic… did something happen to Kiyotaka-kun?"

"No. I sent him there because there was someone who really wanted to meet Kiyotaka. It's a request from a man who has a considerable

amount of money invested in the White Room, so I had no choice."

"They want to see him, huh?"

"It's shallow. They think that's a way to close the wound, but they don't realize that it's counterproductive."

Ishida, who came out of the clinic first, joined me.

"When was the last time you saw Kiyotaka?"

"Well, it's been about five or six years since I last saw your son. I'm very much looking forward to seeing how he's grown up."

"…Are you looking forward to it?"

Ishida, who had just gotten on board, stared at Kamogawa with a suspicious look on his face.

"What? Did I say something strange?

"That thing is a monster. It's not something you should look at with such a carefree mind."

"A monster? That's your son, sir. You shouldn't have said that…"

“Ishida is one of the ones who’s been watching over Kiyotaka since the moment he was born.”

He was allowed to put it any way he liked.

He was more qualified than I, who was only related to Kiyotaka by blood.

He had been trained to such a degree of perfection that it was almost unimaginable for him to be a young boy about to enter the third year of junior high. However, there were many things that were missing in return.

This was probably one of the reasons why Ishida calls him a monster.

Kamogawa frowned at Ishida’s lack of restraint and looked out the window.

2

I've been living in the White Room for well over 14 years now and have completed what was commonly referred to as the second year of junior high. The real world outside was different from the virtual world, but I found myself accepting it more comfortably than I thought I would.

It was unclear whether this was due to the curriculum or some other factor.

While I was waiting in an empty room, as instructed by Dr. Ishida, I was approached by a man.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka-kun. Thank you for coming today."

"Who are you?"

I had never seen him before.

His calm face made it hard to believe that he was from the White Room.

What caught my attention more was that he was holding a vase of flowers in his hand.

This was also something I had never seen before. Something I had only learned and seen in images.

"There's a girl I really want you to meet, so I asked Ayanokōji-sensei for a favor."

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"The girl has become so feeble-minded that she can't even go out. She can keep herself relatively calm at home and in this clinic. That's why I asked you to come here."

"Are those… cherry blossoms?"

"They used to hang in this room, but I had to change the water. It's her favorite flower. She should be back from her checkup soon."

He put the vase on the shelf by the window.

“Kiyotaka…!”

As I waited for him to return, the door to the room was opened and my name was shouted.

A girl, about my age I guess, stared at me and her eyes were wide open.

“I’ve wanted to meet you all this time… I’ve missed you so much!”

“You’re…”

“Yuki! It’s Yuki!”

Yuki. I knew that name. It belonged to a White Room student who had dropped out a long time ago. I’ve erased the name from my memory, but it was natural to remember some things since I can’t intentionally erase them.

“Why are you here?”

Even if she didn't really die, the instant she dropped out, everything was over for her.

Facing the dead. It was a strange feeling, but what was the purpose of this meeting?

"My daughter Yuki has been weak ever since she left the Whi— No, the same facility you're in. She's been depressed. She can't go outside and just keeps worrying about you."

The man who was watching from a distance seemed to be Yuki's father.

Her smile was a little different from the one she used to show when she was a child.

"It's been a long time. Kiyotaka… were you at that place the whole time?"

She looked at me with fear in her eyes as she recalled the past.

Judging by her father's reaction, she was scared of the mention of the White Room.

"For 14 years, I've been there. Today is the first time I've been outside."

"I knew you were great, Kiyotaka… What about the other kids? Did they leave in the past?"

"Well, they all left so soon. I've been the last one for years now. I don't know."

I never cared about the ones who dropped out, including the kid in front of me.

"Alone… Always in that place…? I-I… I, that, that place… I…!"

Yuki's body began to tremble as if the fear she had been suppressing was swelling up.

"Yuki, stop remembering!"

Yuki was distraught as she dug up her memories. Was this how miserable a person who's dropped out of the White Room could be?

The one thing I understand was that she must be the daughter of a well-known businessman.

All I know is that she was treated with respect after she dropped out.

But the fact that she's going to counseling shows that she hasn't healed from the trauma.

And one of the healing methods was to meet with me, who was also in the fourth generation… I guess…

Now that I know what's going on, I have no further use for this place.

"I have to go."

"Wa-wait! I finally got to meet you! I want to talk to you more—a lot more!"

"I have nothing to say to you."

If she couldn't talk about the White Room, we couldn't have a conversation.

“Please, Ayanokōji-kun, can you talk with Yuki for a while? Yes, any conversation is fine. A simple, insignificant conversation…”

“What do you mean by ‘insignificant conversation’? You do understand that I’m new to the outside world, right?”

“That’s…”

“Of course, I can tell her a story that’s full of lies if you want. I am willing to force myself to make something up to the best of my knowledge, whether it’s about Japan or the rest of the world. But that’s not what you want, is it?”

“I-I’m fine. I’m fine with talking about the Wh-White-White Room.”

Yuki grabbed my sleeve, hyperventilating, trying not to let me go.

“I don’t think you should. You can’t talk to me.”

“T-that’s not true…! I’ve always wanted to meet you again… Kiyotaka…!”

“You should have stopped that feeling. Once you see me like this, you’ll only suffer from the difference between your memories and your ideals. If you want to heal your mind, you should continue your treatment here.”

That was enough. I’d rather take a look outside than waste my time here. The outside world, at least, still holds the possibility of curiosity.

“Please. Not yet, stay a while longer…”

Yuki’s father blocked the exit with open arms.

“Is that an order?”

“No… it’s…”

“No, it’s not, isn’t it? The representative of the White Room didn’t give me any specific instructions.”

“Indeed. Ayanokōji-sensei only promised to let you and Yuki meet. This is only my personal request.”

“Then I decline.”

“What?”

“I’m refusing because I think it’s what’s best for her.”

“You don’t care about a kid who dropped out?”

“That’s right. I don’t care about a kid who dropped out.”

But this guy made a bad call bringing me in as a counselor.

“Excuse me.”

“No! Don’t go, Kiyotaka!”

“You’re no different than when you dropped out and disappeared.”

“…!”

“You should be thankful for your parents and focus on your treatment here. The more you expect from me, the more you’ll regret it.”

“No! I want to talk to you! I want to talk with you more—talk about what we couldn’t talk about back then!”

Yuki's spirit, with its terribly childish tone and reactions, had not changed at all since that time a few years ago.

"Wait! Please!"

"Please move aside."

"Yuki… I'm not the only one who can't reach her. My wife's and second daughter's words also cannot reach her. She can't be reached. But… she talks to you… You don't know how much just that could save her…!"

“Goodbye. I hope I never see you again. I’ll leave you to it.”

“No! No! Kiyotaka! Nooo!!”

Her voice crying out and the voice of an adult yelling at her

uncontrollably.

Neither of them reached the depths of my ears. I wasn't interested.

I left the hospital and returned to the waiting car.

A figure came out of the passenger side, waving his hand in the air.

"H-Hey, Kiyotaka-kun. Nice to meet you, my name is Kamogawa—"

I've seen this face before. I thought so, but didn't say anything back and sat down in the back seat.

"…It's nothing, haha. I hope you'll forget about it."

He smiled, scratched his head, and looked forward.

"Start driving."

"Understood, sir."

I sat alone in the quiet car and looked at the view outside the window.

"What's it like to be outside for the first time?"

"Nothing."

It's not that I wasn't curious.

It's just that I don't feel anything, at least nothing that I can call an emotional response to.

"Nothing, huh?"

My father probably had thought so.

That I was looking out the window without emotions.

That I probably couldn't distinguish the difference between virtual world and reality now.

That was a big mistake.

It's just easier to let people think that everything's under control.

At least for now, it's beneficial for me to keep it that way.

There was no need for this man to know that I was always sharpening my fangs.

"You will continue your White Room curriculum with me for a little while. You will return to the facility when the White Room reopens."

"Understood."

The change of environment was no obstacle for those who'd already mastered the skills they'd acquired in the White Room.

3

“It’s a shame—all of this—isn’t it?”

After unloading the car and taking Kiyotaka out to the compound, I left with Kamogawa alone.

“What is…?”

“There’s only one ultimate existence. If we play the right strategy, he’ll devote his life to training people and outperform Suzukake in the White Room. If we do that, there’s a possibility that eventually more than one person will emerge that’s close to Kiyotaka.”

“That was the original plan, wasn’t it? Isn’t that what you were planning to do?”

“My return to politics is becoming a reality here. That’s what makes me wonder.”

“No way…”

“I had never thought of it that way before.”

“Are you going to make him, Kiyotaka-kun, a politician?”

“The strategy to educate the White Room so that they could pass it onto the next generation is what the White Room is supposed to be about. It’s an important project that must be undertaken if Japan is to take leadership in the world 50 to 100 years from now. That is inflexible for me.”

But…

“But, in order for me to take the top spot in the political world, a strong ally is necessary. The earliest Kiyotaka can become a senator is at 25 years old. I’ll be 61 by then. That’s cutting it close.”

“But for a politician, you’re in your time once you’ve matured.”

Of course, even if Kiyotaka becomes a parliament member, he won’t be able to do anything immediately.

In theory, however, he would have the right to be appointed prime minister at the age of 25.

He has the potential to be of much more use than the usual assortment of mediocre legislators.

“What are you going to do…?”

“I don’t have an answer. If Kiyotaka or I were in control of the political world, we could make a big difference in Japan, even if we aren’t talking about the next 50 or 100 years. However, it’s inevitable that there’ll be a delay in the White Room’s education. That’s why I’m worried.”

The most frustrating thing was that he has the title of being my son.

When he comes to politics, the public will think that I just want the next generation to follow in my footsteps.

A big disadvantage, but I think there's a way to make the most of it.

And his lack of joy, anger, sadness, and emotion is also a big concern. It's necessary to improve it.

"I'm sure Kiyotaka-kun will be obedient, and I'm tempted to expect a lot from him."

How much control Kiyotaka has over himself, I can't say.

His mind is already far ahead of ours.

He may not have much emotion, but his thoughts are active, and he'll probably surpass us in two or three moves. On the other hand, he's fortunate in his ignorance of the world and naive in many aspects. He hasn't reached the level of thinking I'm at yet as I'm cautious.

From this stage onward, I was prepared to change my plans.

My will to take over this country was strong and unshakable.

"Today, you're going to have to stay with me a little longer, Kamogawa."

No matter what measures we decided to take, first of all, it was necessary to work on Kiyotaka regarding his personality.

"That's fine, but… what are you going to do?"

Then a hand knocked lightly on the car window and Tsukishiro climbed into the vacant driver's seat with a natural ease.

This man not only had contacts in the ruling and opposition parties but also in the business world. His attitude of doing whatever it takes to win made him risky and untrustworthy, but even in his old age, he was still very good at what he did.

"Ayanokōji-san, you seem to be in good health… I see that you're getting along very well with the Peace Party people these days."

"I don't care about that. What about that thing I asked you to do?"

“The arrangements have been made. There will be no issues with the background checks.”

“Good. And there’s one more thing I need you to do for me in the future.”

I told Tsukishiro and Kamogawa about my future plans.

While Kamogawa was surprised from start to finish, Tsukishiro listened with a smile on his face.

“That sounds like an interesting plan. I’d like to say that I welcome your work, but I’m getting old.”

He was humble, but this man didn’t take on what he couldn’t do.

“You’re the man for the job. I want to see how far he can go.”

“If you’ll leave it to me, that’s fine. I accept. I will cooperate in the implementation of your plan. We’ll need to prepare some pieces that may be missing later.”

I motioned for the car to start and had Tsukishiro start the engine.

I only told Tsukishiro, whom I didn’t trust, about Kiyotaka’s future. But that wasn’t all I was after. I also wanted to take advantage of Kijima and ANHS, the enemies I’ll eventually have to deal with.

A year later, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka decided to enroll in the Advanced Nurturing High School.

Postscript

Thank you for reading volume 0.

This is Kinugasa Shougo. My favorite food is ochazuke, my favorite drink is black tea, and my hobby is watching baseball.

I've been itching to get a dog or a cat, but when my family members vote on which one they want, the vote is always split into 2 to 2, so I wasn't able to get either one until now.

My recent problem is that when I heat up frozen pasta in the microwave for a little longer because I want it to be hot, I often end up eating the noodles dry and crunchy. Even after adjusting repeatedly, I still got the same result. Was it my fault as the user of the microwave, or was it the microwave's fault? It must be the latter.

—Well, enough useless talk, let's move on to the topic of Volume 0.

How did you like this special volume about the past, which was regarded as forbidden in the past Youjitsu's publications?

The setting of the White Room existed in 2015 when the story of Youjitsu started, but I had no idea at the time that I would dig deeper into it and write it down in a single volume.

As a writer, I am very happy to have been able to make this happen, even if in a special way.

It was quite difficult to write this book without disturbing the pace of publication, but I hope that as many people as possible will be pleased with it.

In fact, along with the White Room volume, there is another blank year volume which had not been released to the public existing in material form.

This is the story of Ayanokōji Kiyotaka's life from the end of Volume 0 to the beginning of Year 1 Volume 1.

At this stage, I have no plans at all to publish this material in book form, but I am beginning to think that it would be interesting to do so if I ever have the opportunity to do so in the future.

Well then, ladies and gentlemen, this is a short farewell.

I will see you again in the postscript of the next volume. See you soon!

1. TL Note: ryotei 料亭: Traditional Japanese Restaurant
2. TL Note: Ganryujima Island and Musashi Miyamoto: This story refers to a duel between two Japanese Swordsmen where Musashi Miyamoto arrived three hours late.
3. TL Note: Sake: A Japanese Rice Alcoholic Beverage
4. TL Note: Shoji: Japanese Sliding Door
5. TL Note: Seiza: Traditional Japanese sitting posture
6. TL Note: izakaya (居酒屋): A spot to settle in, grab a drink, and get comfortable.
7. TL Note : Tokubetsushoku 特別職 ; Special Japanese civil service position
8. TL Note : This sentence is not using the honorifics that would be expected when speaking politely
9. TL Note: Shi : Uncommon honorific, typically used in business settings.
10. TL Note : mizu-shoubai : it refers to those who work in businesses that serve alcohol or sex work

11. TL Note: alphabet アルファベット: Refers to the Latin alphabet

12. TL Note: randori 乱取り: Basically a 1v3 judo match

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